

Henk Verbiest

In 1949, [Henk Verbiest](#) first proposed the concept of [stenosis](#) in [spinal canal](#), [lumbar intervertebral foramen](#); that is, lumbar [spinal stenosis](#) (LSS) ^{1) 2)}.



The first case of ICA agenesis at cerebral angiography was reported by [Henk Verbiest](#) ³⁾.

Professor of Neurosurgery at the [Utrecht](#) University Hospital, was born on 16 July 1909 in Rotterdam to Cornelis Verbiest, member of the board of a shipping company, and his wife, Mary née Peters. He undertook his medical studies at [Leiden](#) University between 1927 and 1934, during which time, in his second year, he received an honorary award from the university for an investigation into subcortical optokinetic aspects of vertical head [nystagmus](#) in the pigeon. There he also received training in [neuroanatomy](#) from S T Bok. Subsequently, he trained as a neurologist and psychiatrist at Leiden with G G J Rademaker. In this period, working as a neurologist, he published a paper on aseptic, chemical [meningitis](#) caused by intradural [epidermoids](#) and carried out research for a thesis on the influence of the posterior [spinal cord](#) and medial lemniscal tracts on tonic postural innervation. For this he received a PhD. This work contained a detailed discussion of the pseudoparesis and athetosis associated with loss of proprioception in the upper limb, known in the [Netherlands](#) as 'Verbiest's sign'.

Between 1938 and 1939, he worked in [Paris](#) with [Clovis Vincent](#), the distinguished French neurosurgeon, who, like Verbiest, had first been a neurologist. At the outbreak of the second world war, he returned to the Netherlands and when his senior, Lenshoek, accepted an appointment in [Amsterdam](#), Verbiest was left with virtually sole responsibility for the neurosurgical department in [Utrecht](#). At the end of the war, Verbiest was able to make contact with neurosurgeons in other countries, including Dott in Edinburgh, Bucy in [Chicago](#) and the leading figures on the Continent.

The building of the distinguished neurosurgical department in Utrecht needed immense energy and application, as well as force of character. Verbiest was a hard taskmaster and he was capable of having major rows in the pursuit of his ends, though he tended rapidly to forget them. The success of his department led to his being appointed as a lecturer in neurosurgery at the University of [Utrecht](#) in 1949 and Professor in 1963. He supervised 14 theses, and was responsible for training 11 Dutch neurosurgeons, two of whom became Professors.

He stayed on as Professor for some time after passing retiring age, but became more philosophical in later life, taking a stoical view of the world.

Verbiest made notable contributions to neurosurgery. He was the first to recognise, in 1949, the syndrome of intermittent claudication of the [cauda equina](#) produced by lumbar canal stenosis.

Though this condition has proved to be relatively common and to respond well to surgery, and its recognition was of signal importance, Verbiest had trouble having his original description accepted in neurosurgical journals and it was five years before his paper appeared in English in the British version of the Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery. This rankled with him ever after.

He was one of the earliest exponents of the anterior approach to the cervical spine, which he was encouraged to try by being told by his neurological colleague, Brouwer, that this was out of bounds for a neurosurgeon. He practised early the transoral route to the atlanto-axial region, and he also devised a lateral approach to decompress the vertebral artery when it was thought this might be a useful way of treating some forms of vertebrobasilar artery disease, and for brachial neuralgia. Earlier in his career, he developed techniques in neuroradiology, particularly involving fractional pneumoencephalography and carotid arteriography with proximal compression of the carotid artery. These advances were rendered obsolete by the development of modern imaging and arteriographic methods.

As well as being an original thinker, Verbiest was a skilful and bold surgeon who, as used often to be the case, demanded quietness in theatre, though this requirement did not prevent him from occasionally exchanging sharp comments with his anaesthetist and harrying his assistants. He was a smoker and did not always suspend this habit in the confines of the operating room.

He was a founder member of the International Society for the Study of the Lumbar Spine in 1977 and its third President. He was active in the World Federation of Neurological Surgeons, of which he was made an honorary President for life in 1977. He was on the editorial board of a number of leading neurosurgical journals and founded, in 1986, the journal Neuro-orthopaedics, which was subsequently absorbed into the European Spine Journal.

Verbiest gained wide international honours, being made an honorary member of the medical faculty of Baylor University in 1967, Commander of the Merit Order, Italy, in 1975 and Knight of the Order of the Lion in the Netherlands in 1978. He received an honorary Fellowship of this college in 1989.

He had studied music, was an accomplished organist and had an interest in philosophy, particularly that of Kant, and in the impact of linguistics on science and philosophy.

In 1953, at the age of 44, he married a young nurse, José Hage, and they had two daughters, both of whom trained as nurses. The older married a neurosurgeon. Verbiest died on 27 August 1997, following multiple laparotomies for an indeterminate abdominal condition ⁴⁾.

¹⁾

Verbiest H. Primary stenosis of the lumbar spinal canal in adults, a new syndrome. Ned Tijdschr Geneeskd. 1950;94:2415-2433.

²⁾

VERBIEST H. A radicular syndrome from developmental narrowing of the lumbar vertebral canal. J Bone Joint Surg Br. 1954 May;36-B(2):230-7. PubMed PMID: 13163105.

³⁾

Kumaresh A, Vasanthraj PK, Chandrasekharan A. Unilateral agenesis of internal carotid artery with intercavernous anastomosis: a rare case report. J Clin Imaging Sci. 2015 Jan 30;5:7. doi: 10.4103/2156-7514.150453. eCollection 2015. PubMed PMID: 25806142; PubMed Central PMCID: PMC4322372.

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