

Background: Developments that make a difference

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The **European Inventor Awards** are a very visible riposte to those who regard the creation and protection of intellectual property as a boring, specialist activity of little interest to the general public.

Established by the European Patent Office in 2006, they aim to "give a face" to patents by honouring individual innovators with a prestigious prize, while raising awareness of the role of patents in promoting economic, social and technological progress.

The 15 finalists and five winners this year highlight a range of appealing developments that have made a difference to the lives of people around the world – and in the process made money for their inventors.

The winning innovations, announced in Budapest, Hungary, on Thursday involve strengthening concrete (in the **industry category**), burning biofuels (SMEs), identifying Alzheimer's genes (**research**), implanting teeth (**lifetime achievement**) and disinfecting water (**non-European**). Four are profiled in separate articles.

The awards attracted 170 entries this year, proposed both by members of the public and by specialist patent examiners at the EPO and national patent offices. These were whittled down on the basis of legal and technical criteria to a longlist of 30 entries that was put to a high-profile international jury headed by Jerzy Buzek, president of the European Parliament and former prime minister of Poland.

The selection process included a thorough economic analysis of each proposal by Technopolis, a European research consultancy. Most of the entries rely on small groups of patents, typically filed between five and 15 years ago, so that a long enough period has elapsed to judge their commercial potential.

For example, Jens Dall Bentzen, the Danish engineer who won the SME category of this year's awards, has applied since 2000 for five patents for biomass furnaces that greatly extend the range of fuels that can be burnt, while reducing associated pollution and increasing energy efficiency.

In particular his power plant can burn biomass containing up to 60 per cent moisture, without having to dry it out first.

Having run a successful 2MW pilot plant, Mr Bentzen's company Dall Energy has completed this month an 8MW plant to demonstrate the technology on a commercial scale, for Bogense District Heating Company on the island of Funen, Denmark. Market analysis suggests a total demand in Europe for 275 such plants per year, with a total value of €370m (\$527m).

As the Technopolis analysis points out, Mr Bentzen stands out in the biomass furnace industry, where the level of patenting and innovation is generally low. He gives several reasons for patenting. Besides the universal function of patents in protecting inventions and keeping competitors at a distance, they are a valuable part of a branding strategy, to indicate an innovative business to potential customers, and they help persuade investors to fund a new company.

Most other shortlisted and winning inventors have broadly similar tales to tell, even if they work in quite different industries – though of course those in the lifetime achievement category have a much longer record.

Per-Ingvar Brånemark, the winner, filed his first patent for titanium-based dental implants in 1968, nine years before EPO came into existence. Since then he has generated 57 patent "families" (patents based on the same invention but applied for in different countries), including 18 EPO patents.

Nobel Biocare, the implant company founded on Mr Brånemark's work, had revenues of €576m and pre-tax profits of €100m last year. Though his original patents have long expired, it still holds an estimated 21 per cent of the growing global market for dental implants and is regarded as a technology leader. The whole field of titanium implants has around 100 patent applications per year.

Although inventing and patenting have traditionally been seen as male activities, the female presence is growing. This year two of the five award winners are women, both coincidentally from Belgium.

Ann Lambrechts of Bekaert, the Belgian building materials company, took the industry prize. She has given a new look to the urban landscape with her Dramix steel fibres, which increase the tensile strength of concrete. This enables architects to design spectacular new structures, such as the CCTV headquarters in Beijing, which would not have been possible with the previous generation of steel-reinforced concrete.

Christine Van Broeckhoven of the Flanders Institute for Biotechnology is a pioneer of research into the genes and proteins that cause Alzheimer's disease, with 12 patents dating back to 1991. "We had lots of discussions on the relevance of patenting, who owns it, whether it would be for the benefit of society," she recalls, "but in the end, patents are the vehicle which attracts money."

Alzheimer's is so complex that there are still no drugs or even diagnostic tests on the market for the degenerative brain disease – but when they do emerge, Dr Van Broeckhoven's research is likely to play a role in their commercialisation. In biomedicine, patents can take a very long time to make an impact.

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