
Request for advice

On 29 October 2003, the President of the Health Council received a letter from the Minister of Health, Welfare and Sport (reference CZ/EZ-2422168), from which the following extract is taken:

Dutch healthcare is characterised by well developed primary care. In the near future, primary healthcare will be challenged by a number of developments.

First, several demographic, epidemiological, socio-cultural, scientific and technological developments are taking place which will influence primary care. Population ageing, increasing cultural diversity, growing numbers of people with chronic diseases, growing burden of mental disorders, individualisation, increasing patient participation and involvement of the public will all lead to increasing and changing use of primary healthcare. In addition, medical, scientific and technological advances will make major demands on the system. At the same time, the available manpower is not sufficient to meet the rising demand for care, partly because of the wish to normalise working hours, the growing proportion of general practitioners working part-time and a professional training set-up whose capacity is unequal to these developments. Second, the healthcare systems of the member states of the European Union will inevitably be influenced by the general trend towards European integration. Presently, the position of primary healthcare in some EU countries, such as the United Kingdom and Denmark, is comparable with the position occupied by primary healthcare in the Netherlands. In other countries, including Belgium and Germany, primary care is less well developed. It seems reasonable to assume that, in the future, the EU member states' healthcare systems will gradually become more and more alike. It is not clear what direction this process of convergence will take. For the purpose of long-term policy development, which will involve strategic choices, at both the national and international levels, I want to ask you to inform me about the current level of scientific knowledge regarding

the organisation and significance of primary healthcare, partly in relation to, on the one hand, other forms of directly accessible professional care, lay care and self-care and, on the other hand, more specialist forms of healthcare. In particular, I would like you to include the following questions in your report:

- What are the defining characteristics of primary care and what is the significance of primary care for the general quality of healthcare provision?
- What differences exist internationally in terms of the organisation of primary care in relation to other forms of care, and what significance do these differences have for the general quality of healthcare provision?
- Given current insights, what – in terms of the overall quality of healthcare provision – is the most desirable scenario for the development of primary care within the European Union? Taking EU law into account, which aspects of the preferred development scenario require attention?