
Executive summary

Advisory Council on Health Research. Healthy services research. The future of health services research in The Netherlands. The Hague: Health Council of the Netherlands, 2008; RGO no. 59

Background

In response to questions from the Lower House of Parliament about the knowledge infrastructure for health sciences the Minister of Health, Welfare and Sport has identified the need for an analysis by the Advisory Council on Health Research (RGO). The minister formulated two central questions: ‘... whether the knowledge infrastructure is of sufficient size and stability to properly address the questions regarding developments in the health care system now and in the future’ and ‘... whether there is a good balance between free risky innovative research and request guided research’. For both questions he requested ‘... a good analysis and a convincing answer’ by the RGO.

Health services research in this advisory document

Health services research addresses the structure, organisation, functioning and effects of health services, and the ways in which these interact with demand for, and use of, these health services. Health services research covers the whole field of health care, i.e. cure, care and preventive healthcare.

Health services research supports the societal tasks

In 2006 the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport formulated the Societal Tasks as a guiding principle for the knowledge and innovation agenda of the health care sector. These tasks have recently been updated and are as follows:

- 1 Anticipating a growing and changing demand for healthcare
- 2 Living longer in good health and participate longer in society
- 3 Quality of care and patient safety
- 4 Governance in health care
- 5 Managing limited healthcare resources (shortages and risks).

Health services research can contribute significantly to each of these tasks. In the report a number of examples are given.

The Netherlands has a good research infrastructure that in part may be improved

Since the previous advice on health services research by the RGO in 1994 a lot has changed for the better. The majority of the research is concentrated in a number of larger institutes, researchers transfer their knowledge in a targeted manner, and the scientific and social quality of the research has increased. The establishment of the Netherlands Organisation for Health Research and Development (ZonMw) has certainly contributed to these developments. The total budget for health services research is – compared to that in other countries – adequate.

However the ratio between direct, indirect and contract funding, and the way of programming health services research at ZonMw need further improvement.

Health services research funding typically involves relatively small amounts of direct (government) funding and relatively large amounts of contract funding. This ratio can be easily explained by the large amounts of commissioned health services research. However, the ratio is now such that the ability of the field to perform 'risky, innovative research' is under pressure. This situation may endanger the stability of the research field, threaten capacity building and decrease responsiveness of the field.

Programming of health services research by ZonMw may be improved by providing less strict frameworks. Thematic programming, as such an excellent manner to create focus and mass within health research, is due to its nature not always suitable for health services research. Strict frameworks within a programme hamper flexible funding of health services research that exceeds specific

themes and prevents researchers to quickly address new questions from policy and practice.

The knowledge infrastructure

For optimal use of health services research and researchers, systematic and mandatory interaction between researchers and knowledge-users at every stage in the knowledge cycle is crucial. This interaction is still rare, which results in suboptimal use of knowledge.

Recommendations

The RGO makes two main recommendations to the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, researchers, research funders and the health care sector.

- 1 Reinforce the research infrastructure in such a way that practical and policy issues can be rapidly addressed, while allowing sufficient scope for innovation on the part of the research community.
 - a *Put in place a broad and flexible programme of health services research*

The shortcomings of the current thematic programming are such that they justify the establishment of a separate ZonMw programme on the theme of health services research. This programme should be based on the knowledge agenda for health services research (recommendation 2a) and should provide for research funding that is sufficiently flexible to afford scope both for addressing ad hoc issues and for developing stable, continuous lines of research.
 - b *Promote well-balanced health services research funding*

A healthy balance between direct, indirect and contract funding will ensure that the necessary innovation capacity is sustained. This healthy balance can be achieved by allocating direct funding in proportion to the power of the research group in question to attract contract funding.
 - c *Promote equitable funding allocation within the ZonMw Open Programme*

Prioritisation within the Open Programme would better reflect the frequently high quality of the research proposals if it were to focus on strengths rather than on the weaknesses: the inherent methodological vul-
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nerability that inevitably results from the complexity of health services research.

d Create PhD fellowships

PhD fellowships enable junior researchers to enhance theoretical and/or methodological aspects of their research. This effort to enrich the training of young researchers is aimed at guaranteeing high-quality capacity building.

e Stimulate international comparative research

Even though health services research often deals with regional/national issues, international experiences are highly valuable. Therefore, maximally use foreign experiences by stimulating international comparative research.

2 Ensure systematic and mandatory interaction between researchers and knowledge-users in order to improve the exploitation of knowledge

a Formulate the knowledge agenda for health services research interactively

The knowledge agenda should be developed through an interactive exploration. This type of exploration not only serves to identify and prioritise the topics for the knowledge agenda but also provides a platform for systematic interaction between researchers and different groups of knowledge-users (central government, care providers, insurers, patients, municipal authorities, etc.). To flesh out the practical details one can draw on the experiences of organisations such as ZonMw. The knowledge agenda serves as the basis for the broad and flexible public research programme mentioned in recommendation 1a.

b Encourage cooperation between centres of expertise and knowledge-users

Cooperation between centres of expertise and knowledge-users can be further promoted by giving relevant organisations (such as healthcare facilities, insurers and municipalities) a firm place within the knowledge infrastructure through the creation of workplaces for researchers within these organisations.

c Promote implementation and an understanding of success and failure factors

Stipulate that the researchers and knowledge-users jointly draw up an implementation plan for health services research projects in advance and then review the projects afterwards to determine the extent to which the goals described in the plan have been achieved. The scientific foundations for implementation strategies can be laid with the aid of implementation research.

d Make evaluation a formal component of every transition in policy and health care practice

When embarking on new policy or new interventions, provision should be made from the outset for fixed time points for assessment in order to allow for the evaluation of policy and decisions. Both researchers and the institutions directly involved in the new policy or intervention should take part in the evaluation.

e Instruct researchers and knowledge-users about each other's working practices

Open communication and mutual respect between the players in the knowledge cycle can be promoted by instructing researchers about policy and decision-making processes and instructing knowledge-users about how the research process operates.