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Transnational collaboration in developing and updating guidelines for primary care: experiences from Belgium (Domus Medica, Flanders and SSMG, French Speaking Belgium) and the Netherlands (NHG)

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Background: For more than fifteen years both in Belgium and the Netherlands, guidelines were developed for general practice/primary care (GP/PC). Systematically developed clinical practice guidelines (CPG) assist general practitioners in providing the best possible healthcare in specific clinical circumstances.

Purpose: To explore and develop transnational collaboration in the development and updating of clinical guidelines for GP/PC and to profit from mutual expertise and skills

Methods: Different methods were used: regular contacts on national and international level, development of common documents, guidelines and initiatives of training, sharing their network of other parties, authorities.

Results: Since about 5 years, all guidelines developed have been assessed and pre-tested before further validation not only among the GPs of the developer region, but also at least in one other region or country. This also leads to distribution and implementation of the assessed guidelines in other regions. For the Belgian guidelines a consensus document on the procedure of guideline development was developed between DM, SSMG and the Centre of Evidence Based Medicine (CEBAM), who validates all finalized guidelines. For two topics we started to develop a transnational guideline: chronic heart failure (between DM and SSMG) and contraception (between DM and NHG). Since education and skills development of guidelines developers is important, initiatives were regularly taken to have common workshops, in service training. Recently new initiatives were developed for a Masterclass on using GRADE (Rotterdam, May 2009) and a guideline conference day (Ghent, November 2009). All partners increased their expertise in developing guidelines, also through contacts with the GIN-network.

Discussion: Transnational collaboration seems a fruitful procedure to enhance expertise/competence in and promote quality.