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Value-based paragraphs in guidelines dealing with ethical perspectives on work and health

Noks Nauta¹, André Weel¹, Inge den Besten³, Jim Faas², Medard Hilhorst³

¹*Netherlands Society of Occupational Medicine (NVAB), Utrecht, Netherlands,* ²*Netherlands Society of Social Insurance Medicine (NIVG), Utrecht, Netherlands,* ³*Erasmus University Medical Centre, Rotterdam, Netherlands*

Background: On a daily basis professionals working in occupational health and in social insurance medicine have to deal with situations that give ethical food for thought. They differ in their objectives and perspectives from professionals that only treat the patients' medical condition. The predominant focus of the first group is the patients' functioning (in work and other activities). Therefore they often find it hard to balance other interests. Although professional considerations play a central role, it is less clear to what extent professionals have the freedom (autonomy) to interpret societal rules, ethical principles and professional guidelines in individual situations, as we have found in a qualitative study, based on in-depth interviews (see parallel GIN-abstract 2009).

Purpose: To develop and implement value-based paragraphs in guidelines, that deal with moral questions and support professionals in balancing conflicting interests in ethically sensitive situations.

Methods: In two interdisciplinary teams we explored the possibilities to insert ethical considerations and perspectives in two existing interdisciplinary professional guidelines, in a third team we explored the ethical issues involved.

Results: In a guideline on breast cancer the patient's preferences may play a greater role than is generally acknowledged, while in a guideline on depression we may wish to stimulate a closer cooperation between the health professionals involved. Value-based guidelines dealing with moral questions can indeed support professionals in ethically sensitive situations. In a third team we assessed the ethical issues, e.g. autonomy, privacy, professional judgement, justified expectations, financial interests and justice, and set up a moral framework that should guide professionals in implementing (new) value-based guidelines in the future.

Discussion: By being more explicit and transparent about inter-subjective values in professional judgement, we may improve the cooperation between professionals and the quality of decisions. Our findings and recommendations will be tested in practice and in an expert panel in the forthcoming months. This research is funded by the Netherlands organisation for health research and development (ZonMw).