



National Institute for Public Health
and the Environment
Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport

Exercising Scientific Independence during the COVID-19 Pandemic at RIVM

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RIVM: Organisation, roles and responsibilities

- › Infectious disease ***surveillance, prevention and control*** is one of 3 RIVM domains
- › Mandate and tasks on Infectious disease is broad
- › Outbreak Management team (OMT): core function with high public visibility



RIVM: Legislation, funding, position

- RIVM is **agency** of Ministry of Health
- Funding on basis of **yearly quotations** and extra projects if needed - also during covid
- **Tasks, Responsibilities and Authorities** for large part stated in **Public Health Act**: very detailed on infectious diseases
- Specific **RIVM Act** stating tasks and responsibilities **including a paragraph on scientific independence**



RIVM: changes to meet increased and uncertain demands of pandemic response

- **Newly established organisations;** test organization PH Netherlands ; new directorates and help constructions at Ministry of Health and Ministry of Justice and Safety. And more...
- **More ministries** asking for help: Education, Internal Affairs, Social Affairs, Foreign Affairs
- **Systems:** e.g. **newly made IT programs** for testing (CORON-IT) and vaccination registration
- **Internally:** new **program directorate for COVID vaccination implementation**
- **Processes:** hiring **extra staff**; more external **communication**; acquiring IC **data** from curative care; in court defending ourselves or the ministry against a plethora **of lawsuits** etc. etc.



Interactions with major stakeholders

- a. policymakers** (national and local): ***much more intense*** than in normal situation: security council (national and local), MP and ministers at Catshuis on many Sundays requiring presence of chairm OMT, Technical Briefings in parliament
- b. the media**: a lot more questions and not always based in trust and understanding. Bringing our core values – expertise, reliability and ***independence – into the arena***
- c. healthcare services**: especially IC - ***data , guidelines*** (e.g. on Personal Protective Materials) and making ***IT*** couplings (e.g. with more than 20 IT solutions of GPs for vaccination data).
- d. other public entities**: a lot more interactions with other ministries; the national crisis coordinator and other agencies



RIVM able to maintain scientific independence throughout pandemic?

- In general: **Yes**, as we see it
- **But: Dilemma** of 'proper distance' and 'role strictness':
 - One hand: each player sticks to its own role
 - Other hand: need/necessity for proximity and dialog between decision makers and trusted advisors
 - Which makes 'the appearance of' non-independence suspect and fashionable, and highly interesting for public/media discussions...



Enablers for RIVM 's Independence

External

- Legal position in RIVM Law and Public Health Act

Within RIVM

- Codes of conduct: civil servants' oath; scientific integrity rules from Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts & Sciences
- External Supervisory committee
- Confidant on academic independence
- Peer review and audit procedures
- Declaration of interest for OMT members
- Guidelines on Public Private Partnership (PPP)
- Staff: Integrity training, moral deliberation sessions. Training Trusted Advisor



Challenges Independence

Challenge 1 Politicians, stakeholders and media try to put our independence up for discussion if our advice wasn't favourable for them: in the Netherlands we had several 'framing' exercises stating that "the minister held the pen of the OMT"

Challenge 2 Also the question whether the minister/cabinet was independent (enough) from RIVM/OMT has been raised; did cabinet follow our advice too closely without fully considering other possible angles?

Challenge 3 And not only our independence was questioned: also the integrity and the safety of our institute and several of our workers was challenged in an unprecedented way