Erasmus School of Health Policy & Management

EHMA
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Uncertainty work in an emerging pandemic

An ethnography of healthcare management in a Dutch university hospital amidst the start of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Researching ‘uncertainty work’

Uncertainty work: ‘the concrete efforts that participants put into working with the uncertainties their organization faces’ (cf Moreira, May & Bond, 2009; Pickersgill, 2011).

Empirical research: one Dutch **university hospital** (March 5th onwards), over 210 hours of **observation**, 29 formal **interviews**, **2 focus groups**. Focus on decision making, dealing with uncertainty.

COVID-19 in the Netherlands

- Start in **early March** 2020
- "**Intelligent lockdown**"
- Half of March: **shortage of personal protection equipment**, ventilators –focus on hospitals, lack of test capacity
- End of April: **numbers of hospitalized patients in decline**
- September: **rising number of infected citizens**, 'second wave' declared September 22nd.

Source: BMW Cahier

Tinkering with uncertainty

It [the troubles] *only became more, more and more… at some point we discussed that we only had face masks for two more days. That was it! Each time I left the* [local] *OMT, I thought: 'What* […] *is happening?!'* […] *I kept on thinking;* who [of us] *will get sick?* […] *It all came so very close.* (Interview infectious disease specialist)

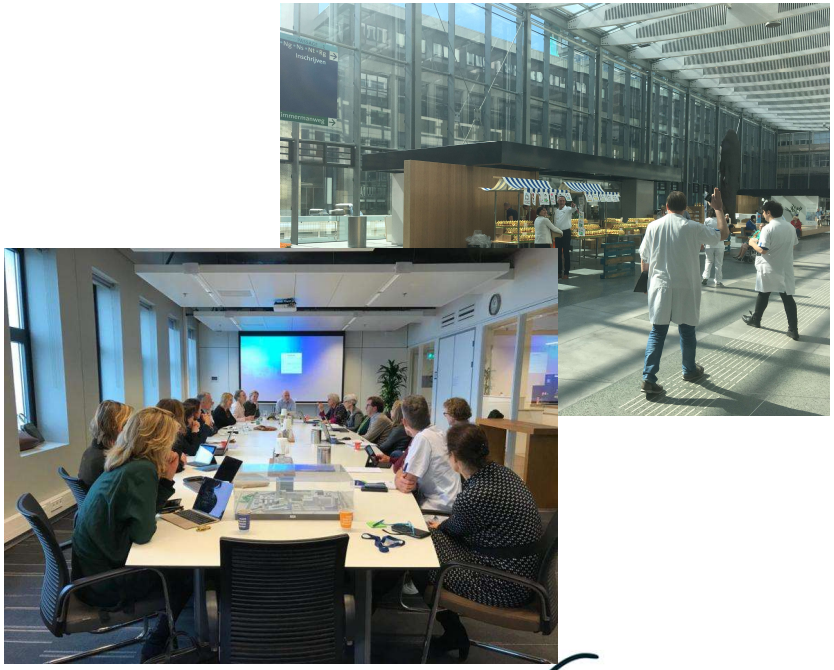
- Tinkering, innovating with PPE, space, personnel.

Governing uncertainty

- Trust:

R: […]*. I enjoyed getting to the essence for a while.* [To] *the things that really matter and not writing very long documents.* […] *Trust, that if I ask you to organize this that that just got organized well…* (Interview department head)

- Informal relations, cutting through existing workarounds

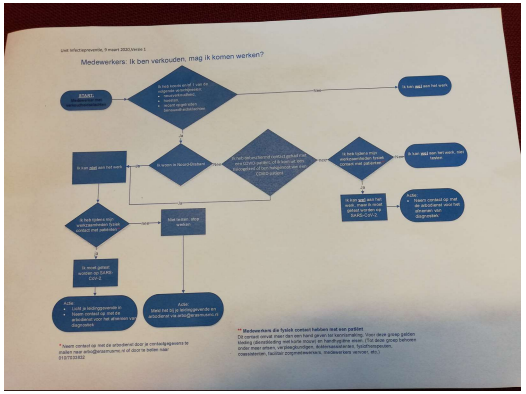


Bron: Linkedin.com, dd. 5/3/2020

Stabilizing uncertainty

- Re-appraising professional expertise
- Ceaseless dialogue
- Numerous protocols, guidelines, flowcharts

“*You make a flowchart; you force yourself to make choices. ‘All right, if someone chooses yes, you go to that side, but what happens when it is a no?’ This worked well in thinking how to deal with certain situations”* (Interview expert infection prevention).



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Conclusion

Uncertainty work: helps to describe ‘work as done’

Three types of work:

- Tinkering: scarcity led to creative innovation
- Governing: trust, informal relations
- Stabilizing: professionals in the lead

High emotions, high time-pressure; new routines questioned in 2nd wave.

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Thank you for your attention!

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