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With copy to Dick Bijl
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with copy to the press

June the 22nd, 2009

Open letter

Safeguard *Geneesmiddelenbulletin's* independence

An "accountant" logic shouldn't drive health policy decisions in the NL when it comes to the quality of information and continuing medical education

Dear Minister,

The *International Society of Drug Bulletins* (ISDB), the association of drug bulletins independent of drug companies, is worried about the future of its full member *Geneesmiddelenbulletin* as drawn in a recent report of the Ministry of Public Health.

The report proposes that *Geneesmiddelenbulletin* be dependent on the Dutch Health Insurance Board (CVZ), and restrict its activities to the dissemination of the CVZ pharmacotherapeutic guidelines and assessments. Reducing *Geneesmiddelenbulletin* editorial activities would lead to depriving Dutch health professionals of the bulletin's expertise acquired since its creation in 1967.

Moreover, we understand that *Geneesmiddelenbulletin's* readers had no opportunity to give their views on the proposed changes. The government should gauge Dutch health professional opinion before making a decision that could have a great impact on the very existence of the bulletin.

Since its 42 years of existence, *Geneesmiddelenbulletin* faced several challenges in order to maintain its financial and consequently intellectual independence, as did several other publicly funded ISDB bulletins. Worldwide, the Ministers of Health, whatever their political leaning, shouldn't overlook the added value of independent drug bulletins in terms of improving healthcare quality in the sole interest of patients. Independent drug bulletins are moreover the only one able to counterbalance pharmaceutical companies' biased messages.

Geneesmiddelenbulletin is playing a crucial role in the Netherlands, and more broadly among its ISDB colleagues. It has been an active ISDB member, and the only Dutch member, for many years.



Thanks to its robust editorial methods (i.e. systematic literature search, peer review, systematic review of comments, additional literature search when needed, review of the revised version) and its independence of pharmaceutical and device companies, *Geneesmiddelenbulletin* is in a position to critically appraise new drugs, side-effects and promotional activities. It can warn health professionals against using risky medicines thus preventing avoidable harm.

Geneesmiddelenbulletin provides evidence-based analysis and recommendations, in order to help its readers to distinguish between misleading claims and real therapeutic advance compared to already existing treatments in terms of efficacy, adverse effects and convenience to patients.

As *Geneesmiddelenbulletin* and the CVZ previous experience of unsuccessful collaboration showed, the roles of these two important health stakeholders are different and complementary. *Geneesmiddelenbulletin* is a monthly bulletin targeting health professionals. In the “main articles” and discussions on new products, it strives to provide a picture as comprehensive as possible on all the relevant research so that readers, unimpeded by bias, can draw their own conclusions.

We therefore urge you to proceed with caution when studying the report recommendations. A linking of *Geneesmiddelenbulletin* to the CVZ above all driven by an economic logic could undermine the quality and independence of *Geneesmiddelenbulletin*, and ultimately patients’ freedom to base their treatment choices on relevant independent information.

Geneesmiddelenbulletin needs Dutch government support, at least during a transitional period, which should be long enough to permit it to peacefully switch to a model depending mostly on individual subscriptions.

Geneesmiddelenbulletin should be encouraged to continue its high quality work in the sole interest of patients.

Yours sincerely,

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ISDB. International Society of Drug Bulletins (ISDB), founded in 1986, is a world wide Network of bulletins and journals on drugs and therapeutics that are financially and intellectually independent of pharmaceutical industry. Currently it has 79 members in 40 countries around the world. ISDB journals play an important role, helping health professionals to compare newly released drugs with existing treatments. More info: www.isdbweb.org. Contact: press@isdbweb.org.