

EU Conference Fostering longer active lives through innovation in care and policy

25 May 2016 | SER Building The Hague



Joining hands for job retention with a chronic condition

SER

Netherlands EU Presidency associated event
Fit for Work Netherlands in cooperation with
The Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands (SER)

EU
2016

On 25 May a conference was held on the theme of job retention with a chronic condition, organised by Fit for Work Nederland – an initiative of the foundation Dutch Center Work Health and the pharmaceutical company AbbVie Netherlands – together with the Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands (SER).

The conference was an excellent opportunity for the SER to draw attention to the main recommendations from the advisory report *Werk: van belang voor iedereen* (March 2016). Fit for Work, which presented the *The Hague Fit for Work Declaration* at the end of the afternoon, used this declaration to challenge all the parties involved to set to work without delay and take a number of meaningful further steps.

Make chronic illness open to discussion

After the opening with a personal story of an employee and his employer, day's chair Tom van 't Hek introduced the panel of experts – comprising Tom Bevers (chair of the Employment Committee (EMCO)), Pia Dijkstra (member of parliament for the D66 party), Jolande Sap (chair of the Federation for Health NPHF) and Gelle Klein Ikkink (programme director of Innovation and Care Reform, Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport) – to the public, Paul Baart and host Mariëtte Hamer opened the conference.

Hamer: 'Workers with a chronic condition and their supervisors must bring up health issues more often on the workfloor. That demands courage, on both sides.' Paul Baart emphasised that personalised solutions are vital when taking measures. 'Always adapt the work to fit the capabilities of the individual. What works well for people with a chronic condition will work even better for those without a condition, and that means for everyone'.

Advisory report presented to State Secretary Martin van Rijn

SER chair Mariëtte Hamer presented State Secretary Martin van Rijn with the advisory

report *Werk: van belang voor iedereen* (Work: important for everyone). The state secretary contended that work and health belong together. Working people are happier and healthier. That is why job retention must be a spearhead of the national prevention programme '*Alles is gezondheid*' (Everything is health) and the new care agenda.

EU perspective by cabinet of Marianne Thyssen

Inge Bernaerts, who replaced EU commissioner Marianne Thyssen as member of her cabinet, argued from an EU perspective for an integrated approach to the problem. The number of people living with a chronic condition is rising due to the ageing population and trends in healthcare throughout the European Union. It is extremely important that those with a chronic condition can stay in work. Bernaerts: 'Making sure that every European citizen who wants to work can do so effectively is at the heart of my mission. This applies equally for the chronically ill – being ill does not automatically mean a person should be written off in the labour market'.

Fit for Work Index: still a fear of openness
Paul Baart presented the state secretary Van Rijn and Inge Bernaerts with the first Fit for Work Index, which gives an overview each year of the expectations of employees and employers concerning working with a chronic condition. The index shows, for example, that 21% of employees feel they would not have the courage to report a condition for fear of dismissal or a negative effect on their career or salary.



Socio-economic perspective

Pauline Meurs (chair of the Council for Public Health and Health Care), Coen van de Veer (member of the executive board and treasurer of the Dutch Trade Union Confederation FNV) and Harry van de Kraats (managing director of the employers' association AWWN) then went on to discuss the theme of the conference from a socio-economic perspective. Pauline Meurs warned against stigmatising employees with a chronic condition. This can be prevented by keeping the focus on work. 'Adopt a personalised approach and adapt jobs in smart ways to allow individuals to work'. The structures and legislation to do this are in place, according to Coen van de Veer, although they could be followed more often. From the employer's point of view, Harry van de Kraats noted that more employers are striving for a diversity policy and inclusive employment practices.

MN: an organisation where those with a chronic condition can work well

This is clear from the recognition given to MN, pension administrator and asset manager in the metal industry. MN has demonstrated for many years that if you, as an employer, have a good personnel policy, you can do much for employees with a chronic condition. In recognition of this, Paul Baart presented Puck Bossert, HR director at MN, with the Fit for Work Award 2016.

Innovations in care and policy

After the break, Mieke Hazes (professor of rheumatology at Erasmus Medical Centre), Ernst Jurgens (committee member of the Netherlands Society of Occupational Medicine) and Louise Gunning (Crown member of the SER and chair of the committee that prepared the SER's advisory report '*Werk: van belang voor*

iedereen'), led by the day's chair Tom van 't Hek, discussed the theme of work as a treatment objective.

The experience of rheumatologist Mieke Hazes is that she has to bring up the subject herself. It does not yet come to mind among patients that they should discuss this with doctors. The company doctor can play an important role as intermediary in this, adds Ernst Jurgens, especially if this is given more prominence in the healthcare sector. Louise Gunning underlined this by stressing that the SER's advisory report '*Werk: van belang voor iedereen*', calls upon all parties involved to take prevention of absenteeism and lost days at work among this target group very seriously.

Incentives and preconditions

In the next block of the conference, the day's chair Dominique Vijverberg (managing director of Stichting IZZ) invited Michele Manto (General manager of AbbVie Nederland), Dianda Veldman (director of the patients' federation NPCF) and Titia Siertsema (member of the general board of the Royal Association MKB-Nederland) to the podium to give their views on what had been discussed, on the basis of their own experiences. At AbbVie, partner of Fit for Work, it is normal to be entirely open about issues that affect a person's health, said Michele Manto, 'We can do this because we as an organisation are active in health care'. The patients' federation receives more and more reports of distressing situations and pleas from its member organisations to devote more attention to working with a chronic condition, explained Dianda Veldman. The business sector, in this case SMEs, is open to this challenge. Titia Siertsema: 'Employers in the SME sector want the best for their own employees, even if they have a chronic condition. But the fact that they have to keep paying the wages if their employees fall ill has made them much more wary because of the financial risks involved.'

SER chair Mariëtte Hamer closed the conference with the message that the real work is in fact only now beginning. All the parties involved must take the right measures, both individually and together, to make it possible for workers with a chronic condition to keep working. 'It is a question of courage above all. Employers and employees must have the courage to make the matter a subject of discussion. That is how we can ensure that continuing to *work* with a chronic condition will become just as normal in the near future as continuing to *live* an active life with a chronic condition.'

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25 mei 2016