



Unannounced, compared with announced inspections: A systematic review and exploratory study in nursing homes



Marielle C.J.L. Klerks^{a,*}, Corry A.J. Ketelaars^b, Paul B.M. Robben^c

^a Inspectorate for Youth Care, PO Box 483, 3500 AL Utrecht, The Netherlands

^b Health Care Inspectorate, PO Box 2680, 3500 GR Utrecht, The Netherlands

^c Institute of Health Policy and Management, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Burgemeester Oudlaan 50, 3062 PA Rotterdam, The Netherlands

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 September 2012

Received in revised form 29 April 2013

Accepted 1 May 2013

Keywords:

Announced
Health Care
Inspections
Nursing homes
Unannounced

ABSTRACT

Politicians and regulators have high expectations of unannounced inspections. Unannounced inspections, unlike announced ones, would, they believe, lead to a clearer insight into the risks and a reduction of the regulatory burden. In order to verify these assumptions, a systematic review of the scientific literature and an exploratory study were conducted. In the systematic review only three relevant articles were found concerned with research into the difference between unannounced and announced inspections. In the exploratory study, Dutch nursing homes were inspected, unannounced, and later announced, in order to compare the risks detected during the inspections. It is concluded that unannounced inspections did not reveal more or different risks, but provided a better insight into the quality of care delivered. Announced inspections are the best option for the assessment both of the organization and of its preconditions for good care. Evidence was found that an unannounced inspection leads to a reduction of the regulatory burden.

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1. Introduction

The formation in September 2010 of the previous Dutch government, saw demands for swifter action on abuses of any kind being translated into policy [1,2]. The policy paper contains a separate section for elderly care, which states clearly that the government expects the Dutch Health Care Inspectorate to monitor, strictly, poorly performing institutions: *'Inspections of the workplace will also include unannounced visits, in which, for example, mystery guests can be deployed'* [1, p. 36].¹ Now the latest Dutch government, installed in November 2012, has reinforced this commitment to unannounced inspections [3] while being

supported too in this by other political parties outside of the governing coalition.

In practice the Dutch Health Care Inspectorate usually announces the inspections of nursing homes in advance. The announcing of inspections is derived from the relationship between the inspector and the institutions. This relationship is based on consultation, co-operation and trust in the efforts of the institutions to deliver quality care. Unannounced inspections seem, at a first glance, not to fit in with this trust. Instead, it suggests an inspectorate whose aim is simply to expose the deficiencies of the institution in complying with the regulations [4]. Another reason for the announcement of an inspection is purely practical: the files and protocols are waiting, people have time for an interview and departments are ready for an inspection round.

The call for unannounced inspections is not in itself new. Both in the Netherlands and internationally the past years have witnessed an increasing social, political and internal pressure to introduce unannounced inspections [5–9]. There appears to be two main arguments for this.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +31 627743627.

E-mail addresses: mc.klerks@inspectiejz.nl, marielle.klerks@planet.nl (M.C.J.L. Klerks).

¹ This quotation is translated from Dutch.

Firstly, the real risks will only be revealed to the inspector with an unannounced inspection. This is because one of the side-effects of the announced inspections is 'window dressing' [10]. This means that the institution has all the time and the opportunity to make things better than they really are. They can sweep the abuses under the carpet beforehand. This assumes that an announced inspection gives no real reflection on the level of care. By contrast, an unannounced inspection means that the institution is not prepared, so that the inspector will find more situations as they really are.

The second reason concerns the assumption that an unannounced inspection leads to a reduction of the regulatory burden. This is the burden the institutions being inspected experience in order to meet the requirements for regulation [11].

The Dutch Health Care Inspectorate started a study designed to test whether the method of regulation in nursing homes, unannounced or announced, affects the risk assessments given during the inspections. To achieve this aim, a systematic review of the scientific literature was performed (Section 2), followed by an exploratory study (Section 3). Finally, we discuss the results in relation to each other in the overall conclusion (Section 4).

2. Systematic review

2.1. Research questions

The systematic review of the scientific literature was conducted in order to examine whether research exists on the difference between unannounced and announced inspections. The approach was specific. It focused on quantitative and qualitative research on the difference between the two types of inspections.

2.2. Method

The data was collected until October 2011. We introduced the following three criteria for inclusion: (1) The article describes quantitative and/or qualitative research in which unannounced inspections were compared with announced inspections; (2) The article is published after the 1st of January 1995; (3) The article is written in the English, German or Dutch.

Our search strategy consisted of three parts. Firstly, given that inspections take place in many different areas, we searched two medical databases (MEDLINE and CINAHL), a psychological database (PsycINFO), a sociological database (SocINDEX), an economic database (EconLit) and a database for educational research (ERIC). The databases were searched using the combination of the following terms: [Inspection or Inspection Program],² and [Unannounced, No-notice, Unexpected or Surprise]. This resulted in 48 articles. In the second step we used a combination of the following terms: [Inspection or Inspection Program], and [Announced or Expected] and not

[Unannounced, No-Notice, Unexpected or Surprise], which resulted in 202 articles. These two steps resulted in 250 articles, of which 51 occurred in both steps so, eventually, there are 199 individual articles. Subsequently, the first author scanned all the titles, the authors and the keywords, and excluded studies which clearly did not comply with the inclusion criteria. Of the remaining twenty articles summaries were read by all three authors. The articles were included if it was an article on research into the difference between unannounced and announced inspections. Ultimately there was only one article which was deemed relevant [12]. The reference section of this article was checked to locate additional articles, but without result.

The second part consisted of a free search on Google Scholar according to the terms Unannounced, Announced, Inspection and Research, and published after the 1st of January 1995. The result was a list of more than three thousand hits, ranked by relevance.³ The first two hundred hits contain at least three of the four terms. The first author scanned these hits looking at the title and the summary. When this information suggested a relevant article, which was the case with five articles, then the summary was read by all three authors. Ultimately, one article was found as relevant, however the article was not peer reviewed [13]. Also the reference section of this article was checked to locate additional articles, but without result.

Finally, we called for research on the difference between unannounced and announced inspections through a discussion group of Dutch regulators⁴ on Linked-In. The result was a research report from the Dutch Inspectorate of Education [14]. Again this was not peer reviewed and this research report lacks a reference section.

2.3. Results

Table 1 shows the specifications of the three articles found through research into the difference between unannounced and announced inspections.

2.3.1. Food safety

Reske et al. evaluated an inspection program in which the restaurant facilities received an announced and an unannounced inspection, instead of just one unannounced inspection [12]. The first inspection, the announced one, started with an interview to provide the restaurant operators with the information, tools and support they need to ensure they can meet the challenges of food safety and prevent food-borne illness. A standard inspection followed the interview. Within a year, an unannounced inspection was conducted to ensure that the problems identified with food safety during the first inspection had been adequately addressed.

The research question of the study was: Could announced inspections improve the results for food safety

² Alternative concepts such as Inspector(s) Visit, Spot Checks and External Supervision did not lead to additional articles.

³ <http://scholar.google.nl/> In Google Scholar search results are ranked by relevance. The ranking take account of the author, the publication and how often the article has been cited in scientific literature.

⁴ <http://www.linkedin.com/groups?gid=151601&trk=myg-ugrp-ovr>.

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