Visible Link
Community nurses for healthy neighbourhoods
ZonMw’s ‘Visible Link’ programme is funding 96 projects throughout the Netherlands. The grants are intended to fund the deployment of extra community nurses so that they are able to perform duties additional to their officially indicated tasks. The extra nurses are deployed in neighbourhoods and rural areas suffering socioeconomic and health deprivation.

**What do community nurses do in ‘Visible Link’ projects?**

ZonMw’s ‘Visible Link’ programme is funding 96 projects throughout the Netherlands. The grants are intended to fund the deployment of extra community nurses so that they are able to perform duties additional to their officially indicated tasks. The community nurses in the ‘Visible Link’ projects provide care in the broadest possible sense of the word. They are a visible presence in the community and easily accessible to all. They know the people in the neighbourhood and local community services, and they are aware of the local environment. This enables them to help quickly and bring in the right organisations and support when needed. The key strength of community nurses is that they are generalists: they have an overview of the client’s and family’s situation. They visit clients in their homes and are able to respond to clients’ wishes, without it costing the client extra. Community nurses work for home care organisations, health centres or community services.

‘The community nurse listened to me and supported me, as simple as that. It meant I didn’t end up in the whole machinery of doctors and home care. Now things have calmed down, I can deal with the situation myself.’ [client]
What has been achieved?

All projects record data about contacts with clients. Most of the projects use a central web portal developed specially for the purpose. Almost 25,000 registration forms were completed by community nurses in 2011 and 2012. Several studies have also examined the effects on community cooperation and the relation between costs and benefits of the ‘Visible Links’ projects.

Reach
65% of all clients are women, and their average age is 68.4. 74% are over the age of 60 and 48% are in fact over 75. Half of these clients live alone, and 28% live with their partner. In such cases, both partners often have care needs that require the help of the community nurse. Although community nurses mainly visit older clients, they do also care for young people and families. 5% of their clients are single parents.

The data recorded show that most of the clients have a low level of education. In 36% of cases, they are recorded as having had no education, or having only completed primary school. 35% have a lower level of secondary education (a vocational or junior general qualification). 68% of clients are retired and 12% are incapacitated for work.

A study by Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR)/IBMG, and other studies, have shown that the community nurses in the ‘Visible Link’ projects mainly assist vulnerable elderly people. The clients indicate that they are satisfied or very satisfied with their community nurse.

Contact with community nurses and care needs
Community nurses work at the centre of the community and can be approached directly, so they end up working for clients via different routes. 32% of all clients come into contact with the community nurse on their own initiative, or through a relative or informal carer.

In 28% of cases, the community nurse or home care organisation initiates the contact. A community nurse might for example approach an elderly person for a chat, in order to take stock of their health status. General practitioners also refer a lot of cases to community nurses, accounting for 26% of all contacts.

Clients’ needs are related to health, illness and medication (51%), self-sufficiency and participation (40%) and wellbeing (37%). The integrated approach taken by the community nurses often reveals further needs and questions, concerning the home and local environment, and issues like debt. 26% of clients are not receiving help from any other individuals or organisations.

Results of contacts
The records show that community nurses have an average of 2.7 contacts with each client. Most cases involve one (46%) or two (20%) contacts. A small group (4%) see the community nurse eleven or more times. There are differences between projects, depending on the target group and focus. Some projects focus on making home visits to all elderly people in the neighbourhood, and on initiating or adjusting care when needed, while others focus much more on clients with complex problems, helping them resolve matters over a longer period.
Community nurses report that by the time contact with a client ends 34% have (re)gained control over their life. In 30% of cases their care is better organised, and 30% have been referred for other care services or assistance. The informal carers of 18% of clients are offered support, and in 8% informal carers become more involved.

Community cooperation
Several studies have shown that community nurses themselves are satisfied or very satisfied with the extension of their duties in the ‘Visible Link’ projects. Other partners involved, including general practitioners, social workers and community services are also pleased with the community nurses’ new tasks. Research by EUR/iBMG has shown that the community nurses are helping to improve cooperation in communities.

Costs and benefits to society
Three cost-benefit analyses have indicated that having community nurses provide a broader range of services has led to a reduction in costs to society. BMC (2012) found cost savings of almost €18,000 per community nurse FTE per year. The reduction is explained mainly by the substitution of more expensive secondary healthcare by cheaper primary healthcare (BMC, 2012; EUR/iBMG, 2013; Zorggroep Almere, 2013).

What next?
Funding for the ‘Visible Links’ projects for 2013 and 2014, to the tune of €10 million a year, has been transferred to the local authorities where projects have already been initiated. The money has been made available by the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations. ZonMw will continue to monitor the projects in 2013 and 2014.

The Dutch government’s coalition agreement of autumn 2012 stipulated that extra funding would be made available for more community nurses throughout the Netherlands from 2015.

Information
For more information, see www.zichtbareschakel.nl (in Dutch only), where you can also download a number of research reports. Mail to: ZichtbareSchakel@zonmw.nl.