

'Something's gotta give' in healthcare – and that goes for pharma too

Dear drug companies,

Last week two reports in the media caught my attention. The good news: two vital new cancer drugs are now covered by basic healthcare insurance. The bad news: healthcare is becoming unaffordable for more and more people in the Netherlands.

These two news items aptly illustrate the healthcare dilemma facing not only the Netherlands but many countries: yes, we're delighted with new therapies that offer hope to sick people. We're grateful to you for developing these drugs. But no, we cannot accept a state of affairs where healthcare costs are rising beyond people's reach.

Of course price increases in healthcare aren't due to expensive medicines alone. Our population is ageing, more people are living longer and there are more people with chronic diseases. But expensive medicines are undeniably taking up a bigger and bigger chunk of the healthcare budget. Hospitals' spending on expensive drugs increased by 10% in 2017. These drugs now cost them around €2.2 billion.

Medicines that cost €100,000 per patient for one year of treatment are no longer exceptional. And even more costly therapies are entering the market. Like Zolgensma, a gene therapy for children with spinal muscular atrophy. The price tag: more than €2 million per patient.

What troubles me most is that we aren't allowed to know why we have to pay so much. We get no explanation, no price breakdown. And that's unacceptable.

It goes against the general trend in healthcare: everywhere we see care providers, administrators and patients doing their very best to help the government keep costs manageable. I've made agreements with all these parties, aimed at more, better quality care for everyone, but at a lower cost. It can be done, provided we rethink our healthcare system: moving patient care out of hospitals and into the community, working together more, introducing more e-health and dividing tasks differently. These are just a few of the things we've agreed.

It's not easy. But, in the understanding that 'something's gotta give', everyone is prepared to put aside their own interests, make concessions and disrupt the status quo. And everyone is prepared to work together, because we all realise cooperation is vital in order to keep healthcare functioning and affordable.

So it's dispiriting to say the least when one key party all but refuses to pitch in, shirks its responsibility and often even makes matters worse. Not because they have no choice, but because they can get away with it.

Dear drug companies,

Millions of people in the Netherlands are dependent on your products – in order to get better or, if that's no longer possible, have the best possible quality of life for as long as possible. No one is denying your right to earn a good living. But sky-high prices for your medicines, exorbitant profits and a total lack of transparency are inappropriate given your important role in society.

I refuse to let patients be the victims of this state of affairs. So in the weeks to come I will be in renewed talks with a pharma company that has increased the price of a certain therapy to around €150,000 per patient per year.

I will ask them to explain this price hike. If they can give me a plausible account – high development costs, previous trials that failed before they hit on this success – then I will ask the pharma company to go public with it. A good story deserves a wide audience after all.

But if their account isn't convincing, I will consider new steps, and that will include going public. For now, I'm not naming names. Not yet.

Please don't get me wrong. I greatly admire your sector's innovative strength. Your work saves lives – literally. The Dutch offices of some pharma companies agree with me that these practices must stop, and they are thinking about how they can provide more transparency. But they're not being supported in this by their parent companies in France, Germany and the United States.

That's why I am working with other countries to tackle this issue. But at the same time, I'm calling directly on these parent companies and their shareholders: take social responsibility for your activities. It's in your own interests to do so. If you don't change the way you operate, the social pressure will continue to increase. One prominent Dutch investor recently decided to stop investing in pharma companies with unclear pricing policies. Will others follow?

In the meantime I will do everything I can to ensure that patients in the Netherlands get the medicines they need. But I can't achieve this alone. I am waiting for a partner that takes its responsibility seriously. When everyone else is prepared to contribute towards affordable care, the pharma industry cannot drag its feet. Something's gotta give.

Bruno Bruins
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