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



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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.

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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>.

Table 1
Specifications of the articles.

Specification	Food safety [12]	Primary education [14]	Child care programs [13]
Title	Beneficial effects of implementing an announced restaurant inspection program	Unannounced inspections in primary education, an inspection report	Unannounced vs. Announced Licensing Inspections in Monitoring Child Care Programs
Author(s)	Reske K, Jenkins T, Fernandez C, VanAmber D, Hedberg C	Dutch Inspectorate of Education	Fiene R
Journal	Journal Of Environmental Health	–	National Association of Regulatory Administration
Year	2007	2007	1996
Country	US, Minnesota	The Netherlands	US, Pennsylvania
Peer reviewed	Yes	No	No
MSMS-level ^a	MSMS-2/3	MSMS-1/2	MSMS-2

^a The Maryland Scientific Methods Scale (MSMS) for internal validity [17].

and restaurant inspection? To answer this question a retrospective cohort study was carried out on the results of 1314 routine inspections from June 2001 through to August 2003. The researchers concluded that the announced inspections were focused on helping the restaurant operator identify and manage problems with food safety. They also concluded that the performance of restaurants that had undergone an announced inspection, had improved by the time of the subsequent unannounced inspection with regard to two food safety measures.

2.3.2. Primary school education

In 2006, the Dutch Inspectorate of Education conducted a project to determine whether unannounced inspections could reduce the regulatory burden on schools [14]. The three research questions of the study were: How do primary schools regard an unannounced inspection, compared with an announced one? How do the inspectors regard the unannounced inspections? Is there a difference between judging the quality of schools where the inspection was unannounced, and the judgments on schools where the inspection was announced?

Only 33% of the 69 schools which were inspected unannounced, completed the evaluation ($N=23$). Of the 1104 schools which received an announced inspection, 45% completed the evaluation ($N=499$). The results showed that both groups were satisfied with the manner in which the Inspectorate prepared, carried out, and reported the inspection. The unannounced inspection scored more positively with regard to the amount of time invested.

Apart from the practical problems, such as a lack of documentation and the absence of management, the inspectors also evaluated the unannounced inspection as positive. The analysis of the quality assessments showed no clear difference between the scores from both inspections. The researchers concluded, therefore, that there is no reason to believe that an unannounced inspection, compared to an announced inspection, results in a milder or stricter assessment of quality.

2.3.3. Child care programs

Fiene's article reports on a study, conducted in 1995 that examines whether licensing and monitoring inspections of child care programs should be announced or unannounced

[13]. An argument for announced inspections, according to Fiene is that a service provider should have the opportunity to put their best foot forward, so to speak, prior to the inspection. An argument for unannounced inspections, by contrast, is whether this should not be the case at all times, not just when inspections are pending.

The two research questions posed in the study were: Is there a difference between announced and unannounced inspections with regard to the resulting records of violations? If so, is there a difference between highly compliant and low compliant providers? To answer these questions 191 child care programs were inspected twice, firstly in an announced fashion, and in the six months afterwards, in an unannounced inspection.

The researcher concluded that conducting unannounced inspections is a worthwhile endeavor. But given the limited resources for inspections, he finds conducting an extra unannounced inspection of all providers of child care programs a bad idea. A balance must be found based on the compliance history of the providers. In this way, problem providers are penalized, while others are left alone.

2.4. Discussion

Despite the strong political calls for unannounced inspections and the choice that several inspectorates make to inspect unannounced, very little research has been carried out into the difference between unannounced and announced inspections. None of the three studies was conducted in nursing homes. Knowledge is lacking on the difference, advantages and disadvantages, between announced and unannounced inspections. We argue that the call for unannounced inspections seems primarily motivated by political unease over the performance of regulators. The call in itself may seem a powerful signal but it is also a symbolically political one.

If we take an overall view of the results and conclusions of the three studies, we note that unannounced inspections can be used in different ways and in areas where the standard is announced inspections. For example, an unannounced inspection can be used to determine whether the number of reported violations, determined during the previous announced inspection, has fallen in the meantime [13]. An unannounced inspection can also replace the

Table 2

Themes and sub-themes of the tool used to evaluate the risks.

Themes	Sub-themes	Number of risk factors
1. Individual care plans	1a. Individual care plan system	8
	1b. Individual care plan implementation	9
2. Communication	2a. Communication and approach	6
	2b. Provision of information	3
3. Physical well-being		6
4. Client safety	4a. Decubitus prevention and treatment	7
	4b. Fluid intake and nutrition	9
	4c. Fall prevention	9
	4d. Infection prevention and treatment	8
	4e. Incontinence diagnostic and treatment	6
	4f. Clients with problem behavior	6
5. Housing and living conditions		4
6. Participation and social independence		8
7. Mental well-being	7a. Mental well-being	6
	7b. Support by depressions and mood disorders	5
8. Safe living and staying	8a. Safe living	3
	8b. Safe materials and devices	6
9. Sufficient and competent staff	9a. Staff adapted to target group	8
	9b. Quality of staff	8

announced inspection, for instance to reduce the regulatory burden. It seems to make no difference to the outcome of the inspection, whether the inspection was announced or unannounced [14]. By contrast unannounced inspections are the norm in several areas. In order for regulation to trigger improvements in care, these unannounced inspections may be preceded by an announced inspection in which education is central.

3. Exploratory study⁵

3.1. Research questions

The exploratory study was conducted to see if inspectors detect similar risks during an unannounced, and an announced, inspection of the same institution. We also wanted to know how managers of nursing homes and inspectors, evaluate the unannounced inspections compared to the announced ones.

3.2. Method

The exploratory study consisted of two parts, both conducted between June and September 2010. In the first part, eighteen nursing homes were inspected unannounced, and, two to eight weeks later, received an announced inspection. The same tool was used to score the risks detected during both inspections. After the first inspection no recommendations for improvement were given. In the second part of the study both the managers of nursing homes and the inspectors were interviewed in order to identify how each evaluates the unannounced inspections compared to the announced ones.

3.2.1. Part I

It was impossible to select at random the eighteen nursing homes inspected because we could not intervene in the regular inspection process. The institutions were selected from the annual list of the nursing homes which were to be inspected. Two criteria were applied. Firstly, the nursing home offers multidisciplinary medical care. Secondly, no announced inspection, using the same tool, has been conducted in the nursing home during the past year. We did not use a control group because the research was focused on the difference between an announced and unannounced inspection within one institution. To reduce the possibility that the second inspection is influenced by the first, the inspectors were swapped over. Thus only one inspector was present at both inspections.

The tool used to evaluate the risks in institutions is based upon the instrument that is currently used by the Dutch Health Care Inspectorate. Table 2 shows the nine themes of the tool and with the sub-themes. Each theme or sub-theme reflects a number of risk factors. Examples of risk factors are: 'No individual care plans were available' (sub-theme 1b); 'Decubitus is not registered' (sub-theme 4a); and, 'A lack of expertise evident among the staff' (sub-theme 9b). Each risk factor could be scored: present, not present, insufficient information available or could not be scored.

Both inspections were made by two inspectors. On each occasion, each inspector independently completed the tool. After the inspection they came to a consensus about the final score per risk factor. Some risks factors could not be scored due to the insufficient information available, for example, nurses said they were using a protocol, but could not hand it over during the inspection (theme 1, Table 2). Sometimes the risk factor was not scored at all because it was not applicable to a specific nursing home, for example if the nursing home did not have patients suffering from decubitus (sub-theme 4a, Table 2).

To determine whether the inspectors detect similar risks at the same institution, during an unannounced and an announced inspection, the data was analyzed using Excel.

⁵ About this exploratory study the Dutch Health Care Inspectorate wrote a technical report [15] and a part of the results of this study were previously published otherwise as a part of a scientific article in a Dutch Journal of Regulation [16].

For each institution, a comparison is made between the scores for the risk factors of the unannounced inspection and those of the announced inspection. For each institution three different calculations were made:

1. The number of risk factors that were scored differently during the unannounced inspection, compared with the announced inspection.
2. The difference between the number of risk factors scored as present during the unannounced inspection and those scored as present during the announced inspection.
3. The number of risk factors that could not be assessed during both types of the inspections due to a lack of information.

3.2.2. Part II

In the second part of the study we wanted to know in which way the managers of the nursing homes and the inspectors evaluate the unannounced inspections compared to the announced ones. In total semi-structured interviews were carried out among nine managers and fourteen inspectors.

The interviews were conducted by a trained interviewer. The managers and the inspectors were asked questions on the following topics: (1) The experiences of, the inspectors, the manager and the staff of the institutions, to the unannounced inspections compared with the announced inspections; (2) the advantages and disadvantages of the unannounced inspections compared with the announced inspections; and (3) the impression that has been gained during both inspections.

The managers of the nursing homes were interviewed individually by phone, after both inspections took place. The inspectors were interviewed in groups consisting of two to four participants. All transcriptions of the interviews were submitted to the persons interviewed for approval.

In the interviews the respondents put forward their experiences and opinions. The interview reports are analyzed with the software program MAXQDA 10.⁶ The analysis process can be described as a cyclical one which moves back and forth between four different steps. This creates a continuous sharpening of the descriptions and definitions; and also of the revisions and the choices made. The four steps require the following: the labeling of text fragments; the categorization of the labels in themes and sub-themes which creates a code tree; analyzing the text fragments per theme and; quantifying the text fragments categorized by the themes.

3.3. Results

3.3.1. Part I

The number of the risk factors that were scored differently during the unannounced inspection, compared with the announced one, was first calculated for each institution. This formed the first part of the exploratory study. Fig. 1 shows the results for each institution. The percentage represents the difference in the assessment of the risk

factors between inspections. A low percentage indicates that there is little difference; a high score represents a large difference.

The results show that during the unannounced inspections, 6% of the risk factors, on average, were assessed differently than during the announced inspection (std. 4%). The difference is not significant. It is important to note that during the unannounced inspection at institution 6, 19% of the risk factors were scored as present, which were absent during the announced inspection.

Further analysis shows that overall the score of 91% of the risk factors during the unannounced inspection was similar to the score during the announced inspection. During the unannounced inspections, only 3%, on average, were scored as absent which had appeared to be present during the announced inspections. The largest difference was seen in two risk factors from the sub-theme, 'Individual care plan implementation' (sub-theme 2b, Table 2): These risks factors were: 'there are serious shortcomings in the care plan, regarding evaluations and revision', a difference of 40%, and 'there are serious shortcomings in the care plan regarding reporting', a difference of 30%. On the other hand, 6% of the risk factors were scored as present during the unannounced inspections, which were absent during the announced inspection. The largest difference was seen in a risk factor from sub-theme 9b, 'there is no training policy', a difference of 21%.

Secondly, the difference between the number of risk factors scored as present during the unannounced inspection and those scored as present during the announced inspection, was calculated for each institution. Fig. 2 shows the results for each institution. The percentage represents the magnitude of the difference in the number of risk factors which were scored as present. A positive percentage means that in the unannounced inspection more risk factors were assessed as present than during the announced inspection.

On average, there is a small non-significant difference of 0.1% (std. 13%). Both during announced and unannounced inspections, inspectors scored around 27% of the risk factors as present. It is notable that in two institutions, 6 and 15, above 20% more risk factors were found during the unannounced, than during the announced, inspection. The reverse also occurred. With institution 16, the inspectors scored 23% fewer risk factors during the unannounced inspection than during the announced inspection. At ten institutions, the difference between the number of risks in unannounced and announced inspections, is fewer than, or equal to, 6%.

Finally, the number of risk factors that could not be assessed during the inspections due to lack of information was calculated for each institution. Fig. 3 shows the results for each institution. The percentage represents the difference in the assessment of the risk factors between inspections. A positive percentage means that, in the unannounced inspection, more risk factors could not be assessed due to the lack of information than during the announced inspection.

In some instances there was insufficient information to assess risk factors. Yet even here, inspectors scored, on average, 12% more of the risk factors (std. 9%) during the unannounced as compared with the announced

⁶ <http://www.maxqda.com/products/maxqda10>.

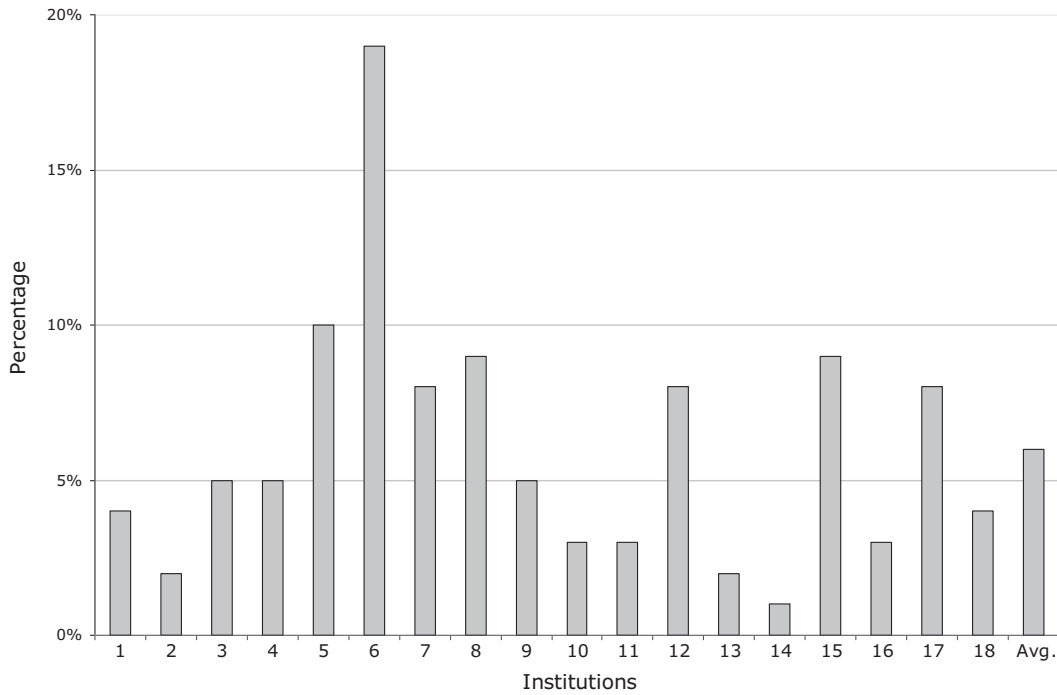


Fig. 1. For each institution the percentage difference between the unannounced and announced inspection for the risk factors which were scored differently.

inspections. The difference is significant ($p < 0.01$). This was most common in the following theme and sub-themes: 'Provision of information' (sub-theme 2c, Table 2); 'Fall prevention' (sub-theme 4c); 'Participation and social independence' (theme 6) and; 'Quality of staff' (sub-theme 9b). The largest difference, 22%, was found with two different risk factors: (1) 'information for the continuity of the daily care is not included in the care plan' derived from the sub-theme, 'Individual care plan implementation' (sub-theme 1b, Table 2); and, (2) 'the use of medication

was not a no consideration in the evaluation of fall incidents' from the sub-theme, 'Fall prevention' (sub-theme 4c).

It is worth noting that in institution 13, the inspectors reported a large difference of 28% between the information that was available to assess the risk factors during unannounced and announced inspections. Among four other institutions, 4, 7, 14 and 15, the inspectors could, during both inspections, assess almost the same amount of risk factors due to the lack of information.

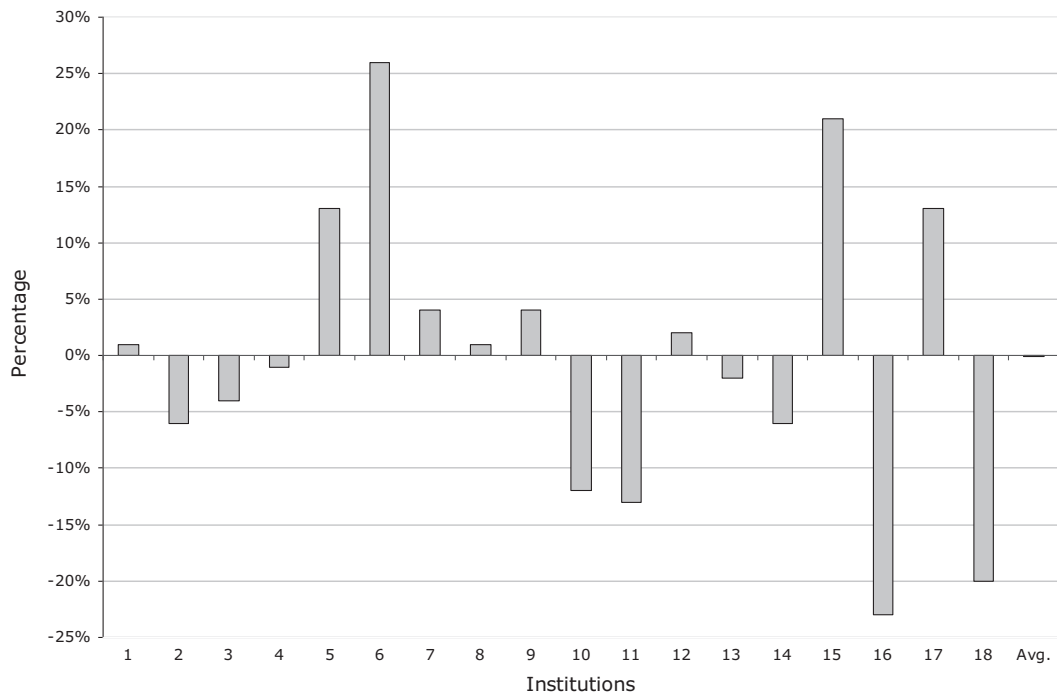


Fig. 2. For each institution the percentage difference between the unannounced and announced inspection for the risk factors which were scored as present.

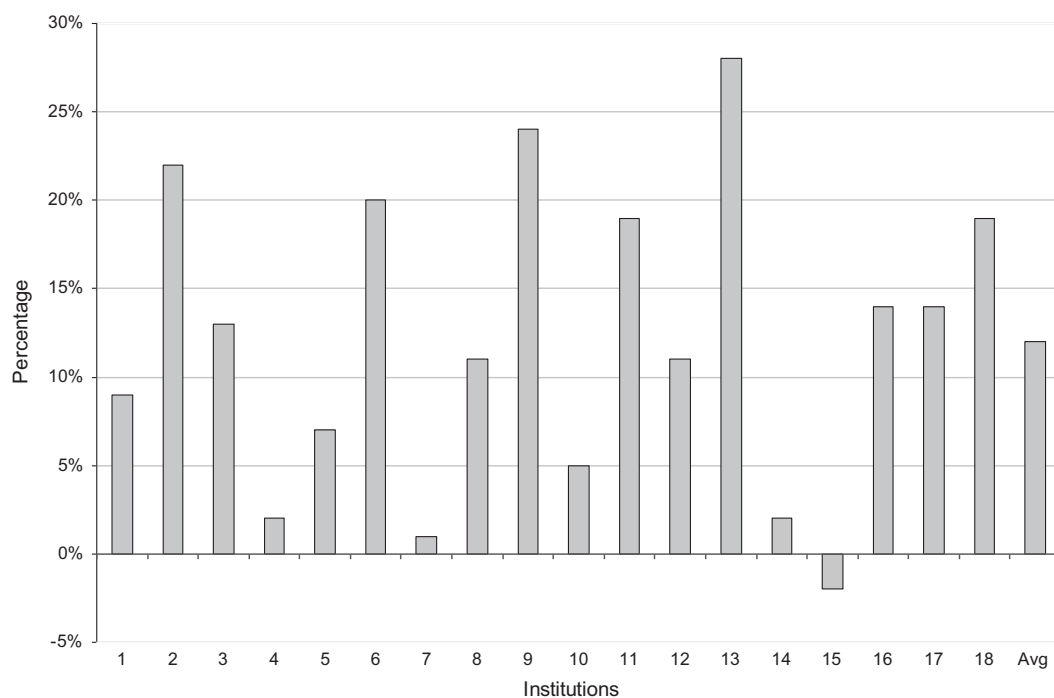


Fig. 3. For each institution the percentage difference between the unannounced and announced inspection for the risk factors that could not be assessed.

3.3.2. Part II

In the second part of the exploratory study we asked managers of nursing homes and inspectors how they evaluate the unannounced inspections, compared to the announced ones. The results show that eight out of the nine managers of the nursing homes did not regard the unannounced inspection as any different from the announced one. The unannounced inspection was for most managers less stressful compared with an announced one, because they did not have to make preparations such as laying out files and protocols and scheduling staff. Almost all the managers thought that the inspectors got a better idea of everyday practice during the unannounced inspection. They did not expect the inspectors to receive a different view of the institution during the unannounced inspection, than during the announced one.

By contrast the responses show that the experiences vary among the inspectors. Five out of fourteen interviewed found the unannounced inspection produce more anxiety than the announced one. These inspectors were concerned whether or not the inspection was suitable and whether the staff would be willing to co-operate. During the unannounced inspection, three inspectors felt rushed or uncomfortable. Five inspectors found the unannounced inspection more challenging than the announced one.

The staff of the institutions responded largely positively to the unannounced inspections, as illustrated by the following quotation from an inspector: *'Everyone I spoke to said: "It's good that you do this, and very logical too, these things should happen much more often. You are welcome at any time." [...] But they also say: "We always have to behave in a manner in which we can be assessed".'*⁷ Four

inspectors found that the unannounced inspection disrupted the daily routine of the institution, because such an inspection makes demands on staff time, which the institution has not prepared for. An inspector put it like this: *'I think it's really unfair to ask people for two hours of their time [...]. I feel uncomfortable. If they have so much time to spend with me, then the client suffers'.*

Six inspectors found that the unannounced inspections had an added value, because they lead to a positive impression of the inspection service both among politicians and in broader society. They feel that conducting more unannounced inspections gives the Dutch Health Care Inspectorate more authority. Because of the 'threatening' effect it assumes, it makes the inspectorate look as if it is more serious about its work. Twelve inspectors also found a significant limitation in the unannounced inspection. During an announced inspection, an inspector speaks with the clients and representatives from various levels of the organization. This results each time in a different view of a particular subject and the inspector is then able to verify information through different people. This is not possible during the unannounced inspection, so the inspectors found that the assessment of the risk factors could not be well substantiated.

One half of the inspectors found the additional information collected during the unannounced inspection, improved the impression of the institution. The other inspectors did not share this view. They argued that the context of observations of the performance of care, during the unannounced inspection, is not always clear and that the observations are nothing more than a snapshot. They also found that the real risks to responsible care are more visible in the organization, structures, or preconditions for good care and that these cannot be investigated properly during an unannounced inspection.

⁷ This quotation and also the following are translated from Dutch.

Thirteen out of fourteen inspectors interviewed believed that the announced inspection cannot be completely replaced by an unannounced one. They found that during an announced inspection the risks identified can be supported better. Seven inspectors thought that an unannounced inspection is suitable as it focuses on the performance of the care.

3.4. Discussion

The results showed a small, though not significant, difference in how the risk factors were assessed during the unannounced inspections compared to the announced ones. Therefore we argue that at the same institution, the inspectors detect similar risks during the unannounced, and the announced, inspection. It should be noted that during the unannounced inspections, the inspectors assessed, on average, slightly more than 10% fewer risk factors than during the announced inspections. This indicates that during an unannounced inspection it is less easy to assess the organization of care and the preconditions for good care. In further research, consideration should be given to what subjects are appropriate for unannounced inspections.

We note that managers of the nursing homes and inspectors do see benefits in unannounced inspections. Almost all managers expect that the inspectors get a better view of the performance of the care during the unannounced inspection. They also find unexpected inspections less stressful because they have to prepare less. The inspectors, in turn, find that the staff appreciated the unannounced inspection.

The tool used to score the risk factors is not entirely suitable for unannounced inspections. The evaluation of the inspectors with this instrument could not achieve a complete view of the institution during an unannounced inspection. An appropriate instrument, and a good instruction to equip inspectors better for unannounced inspection, is necessary.

We should note that the exploratory study tried to be consistent with existing procedures. This was in order to develop practice-based evidence on the desirability of deploying unexpected regulation. However, due to limitations in the regulatory practice, we could not choose a design with a control group and the sample of the eighteen nursing homes could not be selected randomly. The consequence is that the results of the exploratory study cannot be extrapolated to all nursing homes in the Netherlands and that the conclusions should be drawn with care.

The choice of performing an unannounced inspection first, followed by an announced inspection, later, can influence the results of the announced inspection. This allows the difference between announced and unannounced inspections to be larger or smaller than really are. For example, if during the unannounced inspection certain imperfections are noted, then the institution has the opportunity to eradicate them before the announced inspection. Even so, it may be that the institution decides to do nothing because the inspectors, during the unannounced inspection, were already aware of the true situation. Agreements were made with the inspectors in advance about how the unannounced inspections had to be carried out. Some

differences, however, may have occurred. Some inspectors showed more reluctance during the unannounced inspection, because they did not want to burden the institutions too much.

It is also possible that during the interviews the managers of the care and nursing homes gave socially acceptable answers, because the interviewer was employed by the Dutch Health Care Inspectorate.

4. Conclusion

The Dutch Health Care Inspectorate has felt an increasing social and political pressure to carry out unannounced inspections. This pressure was the reason for our review and study. To our knowledge this is the first study which investigated the difference between announced and unannounced inspections in nursing homes. We conclude that, there is no reason to believe that an unannounced inspection, compared to an announced inspection, results in a milder or stricter risk assessment. We must note, however, that if the Health Care Inspectorate is to give an opinion about the organization, structures, or preconditions for good care, then an announced inspection is the best option. If the regulation focuses on the performance of the care, then the unannounced inspection seems the most appropriate method.

The assumption in the calls for more unannounced inspections is that it leads to a reduction in the regulatory burden. We saw that in the systematic review and in the exploratory study, the unannounced inspection scored more positively in terms of the investment in time by the institution being inspected. Thus, reducing the regulatory burden might be a legitimate reason for unannounced inspections.

A combination of announced and unannounced inspections offers the best overall view of the care in the nursing homes. The option in which the announced inspection is followed up an unannounced inspection is the most obvious. There are at least two more ways of using unannounced inspections. Inspectors can integrate unexpected elements into announced inspections, or they can alert institutions to the possibility that the Health Care Inspectorate is carrying out unannounced inspections. Research must follow in order to find a good balance in the use of both types of inspection and different combinations of both instruments.

In the systematic review, and in our exploratory study, there is no explicit attention given to the side effects of unannounced or announced regulation. The Dutch regulatory system is based upon a consultative model rather than an approach based on punitive surveillance. The unannounced inspections did not evoke distrust from the managers and the staff of the institutions. They responded largely positively, possible because they have confidence in the positive contribution of the inspectors to the safety and quality of care, even if they inspect unannounced. It is worth noting that inspectors have more objections to unannounced inspections than the institutions. A possible explanation is that the inspectors make the connection too quickly between distrust and unannounced inspections [4].

The result of our review and study is an initial insight into the conditions under which unannounced inspections of elderly care are effective. This insight can only be increased and become more evidence-based with further research into the effects and side effects of unannounced, compared with the announced, inspections. We believe that before new regulations are introduced, the scientific literature should be scrutinized, in order to determine what is known about these concepts. New regulations should be introduced through pilot studies accompanied by research. Proper understanding of what scientific literature has been applied, in combination with studies into the effects of inspections, helps to ensure that new concepts of regulation are properly thought out and are more likely to succeed.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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