

## “Hybrid management in science-policy-practice relations”

**Professor Roland Bal, Professor of Healthcare Governance, Erasmus University, Rotterdam**

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*These are summary notes to accompany the presentation made by the above named speaker, as one of the knowledge exchange seminar series organised by the Fuse knowledge exchange group, and is to be read in conjunction with the slide set, available on the Fuse website.*

At the beginning of his presentation, Professor Bal acknowledged the work of his colleagues Wehrens and Bekker for their part in the research he was about to describe.

Professor Bal used a story of a man stranded in a balloon, unaware of his location, in conversation with a woman on the ground, to illustrate the issue of the science-policy divide. The man asks the woman where he is and she gives him a precise grid reference position, which is not information he can use. So, he responds by asking her if she is a researcher, and once she replies positively, he makes it clear that he is disappointed with her answer and that he knows she has not been helpful because she is a researcher. She, in turn, asks if he is a policy-maker and when he says yes, she responds to his criticism by indicating he should have not got himself into the situation of not knowing his position and certainly not made out that it is her fault, that he now has a problem!

This exchange was used to illustrate that science and policy are very different worlds, and when they do come into contact with one another, there is poor listening by each side to the other, they speak different languages and they blame each other for their shortcomings. In short they come from very different cultures. This has led to a lot of work in the area of methods of “bridging the gap”. It also creates what were referred to as consequential problems, such as little manoeuvring space, a lack of practical guidance and a lack of a strong relationship between the research and the actual problems in the field. The end result is that the practitioner is left with the problems and nothing that they can implement.

The goal of the research Professor Bal described was to analyse the operation of the Dutch academic collaborating centres and show consequences for practical action. The starting point was a reminder of the range of models in knowledge translation in public health, which include:

- Rationalistic linear models – one-way with a focus on research uptake
- Relationship models – presuming dialogue, based on linkage and exchange
- Systems/network models – which include mediating structures, emphasize contexts and underlying structures and networks in which relationships can develop

Professor Bal stressed that all of these models assume that there are still two separate scientific and policy communities, that thrive on cultural differences and leave the locus of

power with the policy makers. In contrast co-production is an alternative based on the idea that knowledge is not neutral. Co-production includes:

- Science being seen as a social practice
- It does not start from the position of assumed separation of the science and policy communities
- Concentrates on the tightly interwoven nature of science and policy
- Encompasses micro-politics within science

Bal illustrated this with earlier research on the Dutch Health Council, which advises the government on public health. A key finding was that in the public domain (referred to as the 'front of stage') there is a clear separation between science, policy and practice. However, behind the scenes (referred to as 'back stage') the two worlds are tightly interwoven, and a lot of negotiation takes place. The two communities metaphor seems to be strategically deployed – an image 'front stage' representation which creates public credibility and a 'back stage' blurring of the two worlds, hence the term 'hybrid management'. To some degree this reflects the broad nature of public health issues, for example, obesity can be seen as many different things - a social problem, a scientific condition, a practical issue, or an environmental problem, for example, and these are all interwoven and cannot be meaningfully separated from each other.

Hybrid management is defined as the process by which hybrids are constructed and taken apart. Four types were identified:

- Hybridisation – where science and policy are deliberately blurred
- Deconstruction – breaking down the two communities
- Boundary work – working between the two communities
- Cross-domain orchestration – facilitating an outcome across the whole piece

Professor Bal referred to the development of eight 'academic workplaces' and showed their location in the Netherlands on a map, where they are located mainly in the centre and south of the country. The workplaces have a dual role in furthering evidence-informed public health policies and practices, and practice and policy-based public health research, somewhat like the aim and role of Fuse in the UK. Some of the 'academic workplaces' are themed in particular topic areas, for example, young people, the elderly and the environment, but they all work on joint collaborative projects. Some workplaces have dual appointments of staff between the public health department and the University.

An example was given of a project entitled "Healthy in the City". This was compared with an Askfuse project something 'small but beautiful', a six month project to undertake a health impact assessment in Rotterdam to investigate population health and the determinants of health disadvantage. A supervisory and policy group was set up to run the project. The background to the project was that in Rotterdam there were areas of poor health, where there was a ten year difference in life expectancy between the most affluent and the poorest and that on average the Rotterdam population has a low health expectancy compared to the rest of the country. A Councillor handed in a motion and this led to the setting up of the project. Results were developed and discussed and a final report eventually published. In the process of undertaking the project, continuous coordination

was needed and legitimisation of what was done. A lot of what was described as “balancing work” was needed between the parties involved, as well to find workable solutions.

Several distinct stages were identified. A first meeting was described as a “Babylonian confusion”, two hours of chaos and a disappointment, leaving the question of what to do next. The next stage was that there was a lot of coordinating work, and a range of informal discussions among the people involved to work out what each expected of the other, referred to as “expectation management”. The outcome of this was to take a scenario approach, looking at scientific interventions clustered into scenarios, that connected with the local policy programme. One element of the project involved some stage management, to re-create a college classroom to enable “truth to be spoken to power”. Over time an internal consensus developed around next steps. The theoretical interpretation of the work done was that there was a strong emphasis on boundary work, then within the framework of hybridisation, cross domain orchestration took place to arrange a distinction between back stage negotiations to reach consensus and front stage coordination. Other behaviours observed, included intermingling and blurring of boundaries which were at other times firmly separated. Orchestrating hybrids means active engagement in the scenario approach leading to ‘reflexive guidance’ of practice.

Discussion took place under the following headings:

**Dual Appointments** – These were paid for by the Dutch Science Foundation (a branch of the Ministry of Health), in two rounds of project money, which is now ending. In view of this, new sources of funding were being sought. The dual appointments were also reflected in the call for proposals.

**Pressures on hybrid management work** – It was acknowledged that this kind of work has to deal with pressures like papers in the knowledge exchange field not necessarily being accepted for highly graded journals, practitioners having different targets and the pull of Council objectives. The academic workplaces, in some cases, negotiated a space for themselves, a grace period in which there weren’t expected to publish as much, or in which practitioners got ‘time off’ for research.

**Different understandings of evidence** – The point was made that the issue was more than about two communities with different world views of evidence, there were in fact numerous views of what evidence was, particularly arising from the move of public health into Councils which brought political opinions to the fore. An example was given of Public Health England advocating a policy, such as minimum unit pricing for alcohol based on best scientific advice, but the people receiving the advice will have their own views. In discussion there appeared to some similarities between the position in the Netherlands and the UK with local Councils receiving evidence and then overlaying it with local, regional and national policies and pressures. The evidence can just be a starting point.

A lesson was mentioned about not providing evidence that it unusable, for example, suggesting ten lessons on health for school children that cannot be accommodated because the curriculum is already full. The issue really is, “How can you build evidence to help the local politicians?” The scenario approach helps the process of offering local solutions. The

questioner suggested that there rather than a binary situation there was a scale of knowledge where different types of knowledge will appeal to different groups along the spectrum. It was noted that dual appointments could help with the process of developing the 'right' type of evidence for the audience concerned. The benefits of University staff having some time working at a Council or in a public health organisation were also noted, as this would help them pick up soft intelligence about how the other organisation worked.

**What makes the difference to gaps in life expectancy in Rotterdam?**

The contrast was made between the ten year life expectancy gap in Rotterdam, and local experience in Stockton-on-Tees, where the gap could be as much as sixteen years. The key factor in reducing the gap in Rotterdam was to provide employment.

AR – 26th March 2015 (with changes from Professor Bal 30<sup>th</sup> March 2015)