

Evaluation “Effects and effectiveness of agriculture and health care” (WP-064)

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Introduction

The agricultural sector in the Netherlands has undergone significant changes over the past decades, in a continuous search for its added value and increased acceptance. In this context, one practice in particular has enabled farmers to link up to other societal sectors and to add new meanings to their work - namely, the farm-based provision of care for people with various mental and / or physical disabilities, additional to (or in place of) agricultural production. The number of farms providing care services, or “care farms” (in Dutch: “zorgboerderijen”), has increased rapidly during the past decade, both in absolute numbers and relative to the entire agricultural sector. This development is a repetition from much earlier health care practice where many care institutions had their own farm. Professionalization and concentration of health care did eradicate this farm related care element.

In itself, this new development on care could indicate that care activities on farms are appreciated by clients and farmers alike. However, to date no scientific studies have been carried out to investigate if the combination of agriculture and care contains valuable health-promoting elements for the care of its clients. In this context, the current research project set out to evaluate the relevance of care farms for the care of adults with mental disorders, the largest client group on farms, and in particular for adults with depression and/or anxiety disorders.

Research

Given the imperative to approach the topic from a medical / public health perspective, Sorana Iancu, a medical doctor with public health specialization, was engaged in the study as PhD student. Her background provided the tools for approaching day care on farms from a dual perspective, namely as an opportunity for care/rehabilitation (public health approach) and as (supportive to the) treatment for depressive/anxiety disorders (medical approach).

The first line of research explored the relationships between the mental care sector and care farms, in order to understand to what extent this approach to day care fits into the regular provision of psychiatric rehabilitation. The studies within this approach were conducted at both service level and at client level .

The second line of research focused on the potential of care farms for the recovery of adult clients from depressive / anxiety disorders. This study was planned as a comparison between clients of care farms and clients of other comparable day care services. The methodology consisted in a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods focusing on aspects such as severity of depression/anxiety and indicators of functioning. In the event that changes are observed in the severity of depression / anxiety, a neuroimaging study was planned, in order investigate the neurologic correlations to explain these findings.

Main results

The *public health approach* to the day care services on farms yielded results on service and on client level. On service level, it was shown that mental care services are familiar with care farms, but collaboration is only limited to psychiatric rehabilitation. The farm care contributes specifically to the activation of clients who do

not participate in other similar services (such as recreational/educative/creative activities centres – RECC – and social workplaces – SW). On the client level, the study revealed that clients of care farms involve in a dynamic learning process regarding handling responsibilities despite disability, which applies only partially to SW and not at all to RECC. These results are important for the medical study because they inform on the specific health-promoting elements identified on care farms.

Setting up the *medical study* proved to be a big pioneering challenge because of 1. the need of study protocol assessments by a scientific medical and an ethics committee; 2. research tool development on the locations and with the target populations; 3. training for the data collection of psychiatric research; 4. establishment of an institutionalized infrastructure base for the data collection and management; 5. involvement of the largest intermediary organization in the Netherlands, Landzijde, for the recruitment of participants in the care farm cohort; and finally 5. involvement of one of the largest providers of day care services in the Netherlands, REAKT, for the recruitment of participants in the SW and RECC control cohorts. Data collection with participants on care farms is still taking place.

Meaning for TransForum

So far, the care farm transition has been successful in bringing the topic prominently to the attention of the medical community through the involvement of prominent medical professionals from the VUmc and the successful assessment of the study by two major committees of medical and ethics research. Furthermore, by investigating the opportunities, as well as the bottlenecks of partnerships between mental care services and care farms, the bases for a larger dissemination of the results of the medical part of the study have already been laid. This is likely to make the communication of results to the target audience of medical doctors and care services more successful. This will improve the position of care farms and of their clients in the professional medical world.

Implications for Metropolitan Agriculture

In metropolitan areas, care farms will be located near cities delivering the clients improved connections between agriculture and city dwellers needs. In practice these care farms are sustainable by organic or comparable production of green products.

Implications for Connecting Values and Agro-Innovations System

Within this project, the practical knowledge of actors in the care farming arena (care farming practitioners, individual clients, client boards and intermediaries) has been integrated into the expertise of mental health professionals (psychiatrists, rehabilitation professionals, public health experts) for comparing the provision of care on farms to other similar services. The results thereof are expected to provide a deeper understanding of the extent and manner in which care activities on farms can contribute to the mental health and well-being of people with depression and/or anxiety. This will enable more meaningful collaborations between care farms and mental care services, which will result in a better care of clients with mental disorders and stimulation of this type of sustainable farming.