



To the Minister of Health, Welfare and Sport

Subject : Review of the Knowledge Centre for Obesity's report entitled
Overweight and obesity

Your reference : VGP/VV 2731065

Our reference : U-260/ES/cn/Publication no. 2007/08E

Enclosure(s) : -

Date : February 22, 2007

Dear Minister,

In 2003, the Health Council of the Netherlands published an advisory report on developments in the prevention and treatment of overweight and obesity¹. The advisory report concluded that there had been a sharp increase in the prevalence of overweight and obesity in the Netherlands and that there are no indications that the ongoing increase is abating. Given the steady increase in prevalence and the severity of its consequences for public health, it is pleasing to note that the problem is receiving considerable attention in current health policy.

Research is underway in numerous subsectors to enable the options for prevention and treatment to be stated more precisely. In connection with this, on 16 November 2006, your predecessor requested the Health Council to review a report by the Knowledge Centre for Obesity (KCO). The report answers seven questions your ministry had asked. I requested three experts in the Health Council's network, Professor H.C.G. Kemper, Professor A.M.W.J. Schols and Professor G.P.A. Zielhuis, to assess the scientific merits of the KCO report. This advisory letter is based on their comments.

Although the information presented in the KCO report provides a reliable impression and the authors have done their best to seek out the most recent scientific literature, there are shortcomings in the depth of the discussion. Two factors account for this in my opinion. The first is that questions put to the KCO had to be answered in a relatively short time. The second is that the context in which the questions were asked and their purpose were not clearly defined. These

¹ Health Council of the Netherlands. Overweight and obesity. The Hague: Health Council of the Netherlands, 2003; publication no. 2003/07.



Subject : Review of the Knowledge Centre for Obesity's
report entitled *Overweight and obesity*
Our reference : U-260/ES/cn/Publication no. 2007/08E
Page : 2
Date : February 22, 2007

factors contributed to the KCO report's fragmentary character. The report presents various data on trends in the prevalence of overweight and obesity but there is a lack of detail concerning questions about the comparability of the data. Moreover, although the authors state that some growth-study data exist that enable trends prior to 1980 to be determined, they provide no further details about this. In my opinion, the section on an effective approach to overweight and obesity is too akin to a policy document and pays too little attention to the degree of scientific substantiation of prevention programmes and methodological problems that play a role in them. In the general sense, it is striking that it provides qualitative answers to the quantitative questions the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport had asked.

What the Health Council emphasised in 2003 still applies: many questions about overweight and obesity are complex and can only be answered to a very limited extent on the basis of the available scientific data. In such a situation it is more important than ever to discuss the data in an orderly manner, taking into account their interrelationships. This brings me to a closing remark. The authors of the KCO report are only partially accountable for the fact that parts of their analyses lack the required depth. A much more thorough analysis would be required to do justice to the complexity of the questions asked, and that would take time.

Yours sincerely,

(signed)

Professor D. Kromhout,
Vice President