

WBO: screening for hepatitis

No. 2020/01, The Hague, January 27, 2020

Executive summary

Health Council of the Netherlands



The Municipal Health Service and Medical Assistance at Accidents and Disasters (GGD-GHOR) want to launch pilot studies to screen first-generation non-Western migrants for hepatitis B and C. At the request of the State Secretary for Health, Welfare and Sport, the Health Council's Committee on Population Screening will advise on the question of whether a permit is required for these pilot studies, under the Population Screening Act (WBO).

In the Committee's view, the proposed screening programme qualifies as population screening, as defined in the WBO. This is because it involves the offer of medical testing (screening for hepatitis B and C) to a targeted category of the population (first-generation, non-Western migrants), which is partly carried out for the benefit of the participants (they will be informed of the results and, if an infection is confirmed,

they will be referred to their GP). In the Committee's view, the pilot studies do not require a permit under the WBO, because no ionising radiation is involved and infections with hepatitis B and C can, in general, be effectively treated. Nor does it involve screening for cancer (or risk indicators of cancer). The primary purpose of the screening is to detect people with an infection so that it can be treated. This is important because hepatitis B and C infections can lead to liver failure in the long term. The purpose of the screening is also communicated as such to the (potential) participants. Untreatable cases of hepatitis B and C viruses are associated with a low absolute risk of liver cancer. The remit of population screening programmes terminates at the point when patients are referred to a GP, as there is now a medical indication for diagnosis (or further diagnostic tests).

The Committee advises the State Secretary for Health, Welfare and Sport to discard the permit application and to refer the researchers to a medical ethics review committee for permission to carry out the pilot studies.



The Health Council of the Netherlands, established in 1902, is an independent scientific advisory body. Its remit is “to advise the government and Parliament on the current level of knowledge with respect to public health issues and health (services) research...” (Section 22, Health Act).

The Health Council receives most requests for advice from the Ministers of Health, Welfare and Sport, Infrastructure and Water Management, Social Affairs and Employment, and Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality. The Council can publish advisory reports on its own initiative. It usually does this in order to ask attention for developments or trends that are thought to be relevant to government policy.

Most Health Council reports are prepared by multidisciplinary committees of Dutch or, sometimes, foreign experts, appointed in a personal capacity. The reports are available to the public.

This publication can be downloaded from www.healthcouncil.nl.

Preferred citation:

Health Council of the Netherlands. WBO: screening for hepatitis.

The Hague: Health Council of the Netherlands, 2020; publication no. 2020/01.

All rights reserved

