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INTERVIEW PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS IN THE HUMANITIES

Confidence in telecare by Philip Nickel

Nowadays patients with chronic diseases can take measurements themselves using digital information systems. They can then supply these data to their physician or request advice from him or her. Philosopher Philip Nickel (Eindhoven University of Technology) is investigating how these technological innovations are changing the confidential relationship between physician and patient and what that confidentiality is based on. The research can contribute to the development of an ethical protocol for telecare. Nickel is doing this research in collaboration with two commercial partners that are developing telecare services.

How did you find these partners?

'I found a lot of information on the NWO webpages about the economic priority areas policy on health and healthcare. That is how I came across companies who provide services to hospitals and specialists. MobiHealth is developing applications for the self-measurement of blood pressure, for example. Sananet offers patients tele-supervision in how to deal with their illness on an everyday basis. Telecare is a developing field because it is cost effective and efficient, but trust remains an important basic condition. Carefully dealing with the confidential relationship between physician and patient is vital for our partners and that is why they are interested in this research. Unlike a lot of other research into telecare, this project is not investigating experimental systems but existing commercial services. That also benefits the quality of the services provided.'

Which agreements did you make?

"MobiHealth arranges our interviews with their patients and physicians, provides us with their data, participates in the research and gives advice. With Sananet we are developing an ethical framework for the assessment of the interview results.

MobiHealth was immediately very positive about our proposal. Sananet joined us at the last minute because a second partner was needed for the funding. The proposal with them was therefore put together quite hastily. That led to confusion about the division of tasks and the funding. Furthermore, it transpired that our partners did not know each other at all. That required some explanation from our side but since then we have managed to harmonise everything well.'

How does public-private partnership work in practice?

'For me as a philosopher it was both new and surprising to work with partners whose main priority is making a profit. However, they also provide valuable ideas and take the patients' interests seriously. The communication is sometimes brief and to the point and I had to get used to that. However, I value the good and open relationship. It is a question of give and take. Our partnership with two very different private partners has become one of the strengths of our project because they complement each other well in terms of the services they provide: self-measurements and coaching. That is enriching the research.'

Tips for fellow researchers?

'Present your research proposal with a lot of enthusiasm to the intended partners and make sure that it really does have something to offer them. I sometimes see humanities researchers with outstanding proposals who cannot find any partners because the proposal provides insufficient opportunities or is not attractive enough. Also use the Internet to find as much information as possible about potential partners and then simply contact them by phone or e-mail.'