The dynamics in applied COVID-19 pharmacotherapy and the influence of national guidance in The Netherlands: a quantitative and qualitative study

Elien B Uitvlugt, Danny Y F Soeng, Paul van der Linden, Ewoudt M W van de Garde

ABSTRACT

Objective At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Netherlands, the Dutch Working Party on Antibiotic Policy constructed an advisory document about off-label drug treatment options that was regularly updated with new scientific findings. The aim of this study is to describe the dynamics in applied COVID-19 pharmacotherapy during the first 100 days of the pandemic and to assess how the national advisory document influenced local hospital policies.

Methods A multicentre observational cohort study was conducted in six hospitals in the Netherlands. Patients with confirmed COVID-19 admitted between 27 February and 7 June 2020 were studied. Drug prescription data were collected and percentages of patients receiving a specific treatment were calculated. These percentages were plotted together with release dates of the national advisory document. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with hospital pharmacists and infectious diseases specialists were conducted to gain insight into the development and implementation of pharmacotherapy treatment protocols in hospitals.

Results Data from 1511 patients (60% men, mean age 66 years) were analysed. From mid-March (hydroxy)chloroquine was being prescribed in all six hospitals to approximately 70% of patients at admission. Frequencies of other off-label treatments were below 2%. In the week of 6 April 2020, the first hospital discontinued prescribing (hydroxy)chloroquine and the last hospital discontinued in the week of 4 May 2020 (total range −19 to +10 days after the national advisory document advised against its use (1 May 2020)). All interviewees (n=6) stated that the hospitals based their policies mainly on the national advisory document but also assessed scientific literature themselves. Order panels were constructed to support prescribing.

Conclusion Dutch hospitals opted en masse for (hydroxy)chloroquine as COVID-19 therapy at the start of the pandemic, although the time until the therapy was no longer prescribed differed by several weeks. The fact that hospitals defined pharmacotherapy regimens based on their own assessment of the scientific literature besides the national advisory document can explain this variation.

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of 2020 the world has been facing the enormous impact of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). Especially during the first months of the pandemic, there was much uncertainty regarding the optimal pharmacotherapy, which led to the frequent use of off-label therapies in many countries. In the Netherlands, the Dutch Working Party on Antibiotic Policy (SWAB) composes evidence-based guidelines regarding optimal utilisation of antibiotics with the aim of limiting the development of antimicrobial resistance. On 18 March 2020, SWAB released a national advisory document which summarised evidence and provided advice on the use and non-use of pharmacotherapeutic options against COVID-19 for the purpose of supporting Dutch hospitals with keeping on track with rapidly increasing scientific knowledge. This document has been regularly updated following its first release. However, it is unknown how this document influenced local hospital pharmacotherapy policies.

The aim of this study is therefore to describe the dynamics in applied COVID-19 pharmacotherapy in the Netherlands and to assess how the national advisory document influences local hospital policies.

METHODS

Study design and setting

Six hospitals geographically spread across the Netherlands participated in the study (five large teaching hospitals from the Santeon network and one general hospital (Tergooi Hospital)). Hospitals identified all patients (aged >18 years) with confirmed COVID-19 admitted to a non-ICU ward between 27 February and 7 June 2020 and not discharged, transferred to another hospital or ICU ward, or died within 24 hours from admission. Next, for all these patients, drug prescription data from the day of admission were extracted from the Santeon Farmadatabase for all hospitals except one, which extracted data from the local Electronic Health Record system directly. Based on these prescription data, percentages of patients receiving a specific treatment were calculated in 7-day intervals. Subsequently, these percentages were plotted together with release dates of the aforementioned national advisory document. The advice from this document is summarised in online supplemental figure 1. Besides the quantitative assessment of prescription practice, all hospitals were invited to participate in an interview study. From each participating hospital, one infectious disease specialist or hospital pharmacist involved in the development of local treatment protocols for COVID-19 was interviewed. Interviews lasted 30 min and were conducted by video conference. A semi-structured
questionnaire was used consisting of three main topics: development, implementation and evaluation of treatment protocols (see online supplemental interview guide). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were sent to the interviewees for assessing completeness and accurateness.

Data analyses
All data were analysed in Microsoft Excel 2016 (Microsoft, Redmond, Washington, USA). Descriptive statistics were used to describe patients’ characteristics and pharmacotherapy regimen differences in type of antiviral, anti-inflammatory and antimicrobial drugs prescribed at day of admission in the different hospitals.

All six transcripts were analysed by directed content analysis, a systematic process in which codes are assigned to specific text portions and thereafter classified based on an existing theory. In this study, the theory of Fleuren et al was used. They identified groups of determinants that may affect successful implementation of healthcare innovations such as guidelines.

Codes were assigned using ATLAS.ti version 9.0.15 (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, Berlin, Germany). The transcripts were coded by a single person (DYFS) followed by a second round of coding by another person (EBU). Subsequently, all codes were compared and discussed until consensus was achieved. Afterwards, all codes were grouped according to the theory of Fleuren et al into three categories: the guideline, the organisation and the users.

RESULTS
Patient selection and baseline characteristics
In total, 1812 patients with confirmed COVID-19 were hospitalised in the time frame under study, of which 174 (9.6%) were admitted to the ICU within 24 hours after presentation at the emergency department, 14 (0.8%) died within 24 hours, 78 (4.3%) were discharged home, 27 (1.5%) were transferred to another hospital and 8 (0.4%) were transferred to a location elsewhere. Hence, 1511 patients remained for the quantitative analysis, with 905 (59.9%) men and with a mean age of 66.0 years.

Prescribed drugs
During the period under study, the following drugs discussed in the national advisory document were prescribed to one or more patients: (hydroxy)chloroquine (n=885), azithromycin (n=24), lopinavir/ritonavir (n=6), oseltamivir (n=4). Because (hydroxy)chloroquine appeared the only drug to be prescribed extensively, further analyses focused solely on (hydroxy)chloroquine (dosage regimen: hydroxychloroquine day 1: 400 mg twice a day and days 2–5: 200 mg twice a day; chloroquine: day 1: start 600 mg,

Figure 1  Weekly percentage of patients treated with (hydroxy)chloroquine against the time of the study within which the advice was valid. Weeks with <5 hospitalisations were ignored. Continuous line shows chloroquine, dotted line shows hydroxychloroquine.
following 300 mg after 12 hours and days 2–5: 300 mg twice a day.

The percentage of patients treated with (hydroxy)chloroquine per hospital per week is shown in figure 1. In the week of 2 March 2020, the first hospitals started with (hydroxy)chloroquine treatment, whereas other hospitals followed 1 week later when the national advisory document was released. On average, 70% of patients admitted were prescribed (hydroxy)chloroquine until the first hospital discontinued treatment in the week of 6 April 2020. No patients were prescribed (hydroxy)chloroquine after 11 May 2020. The national advisory document advised against its use from 1 May 2020 because there was insufficient evidence of the effectiveness of (hydroxy)chloroquine treatment for patients with COVID-19.7

Local treatment policies
In total, four hospital pharmacists and two infectious disease specialists involved in hospital policy-making of the treatment of COVID-19 were interviewed. Their responses are shown in online supplemental table 1. In summary, all hospitals mainly based their policies on the national advisory document. One hospital used this document unchanged, while other hospitals made hospital-specific adjustments to fit the local clinical setting. Besides the national advisory document, hospitals also assessed scientific literature due to rapidly evolving scientific insights.

In all hospitals, already existing or newly formed multidisciplinary teams were responsible for the development and implementation of hospital policies. These teams consisted of at least hospital pharmacists, infection disease specialists and pulmonologists. Decisions were made rapidly and easily in frequent (ad hoc) meetings, because all healthcare was focused on COVID-19.

During the implementation phase, order sets were developed in the electronic patient record to ease the prescription of COVID-19 medication and changes were actively communicated to the users of the policies. Due to the COVID-19 focus of all healthcare providers, the policies were widely supported. Deviations from hospital policies did consciously occur due to clinical assessment of patient characteristics and co-medication.

DISCUSSION
This study shows that (hydroxy)chloroquine treatment was prescribed to the majority of patients in all hospitals from the start of the pandemic. In contrast to the adoption of (hydroxy)chloroquine treatment, the timing of discontinuing prescribing (hydroxy)chloroquine showed more variation (−19 to +10 days after the national advisory document advised against its use).

The fact that hospitals determined pharmacotherapy regimens based on their own assessment of the scientific literature besides the national advisory document can explain this variability in discontinuation.

Although the interviews yielded positive opinions about the availability of the national advisory document, several suggestions for improvement could be identified: (1) addition of advice regarding specific patient populations (such as impaired kidney function and dialysis); (2) consideration of medicinal shortages and costs; and (3) evaluation of the medicinal safety of off-label treatments in association with the Dutch pharmacovigilance centre Lareb.

Possible improvements concerning the hospital are prevention of tension and incomprehension between wards by harmonising tasks and expectations, harmonisation of regional COVID-19 approach due to patient transfers between hospitals and communication of adjustments of hospital policies to all users including non-prescribers as users who are responsible for updating order sets parallel to policy adjustments.

Because of the design of the study, collecting and analysing prescription data parallel with the execution of the interviews, a limitation of the study is that we were not able to discuss the prescription data during the interviews. This prevents conclusions about causal relations between approaches to local policy making and prescription practices. Furthermore, we were not able to assess whether alterations in prescribing practices were solely linked to modifications in policy or influenced by suboptimal implementation as well. Finally, as this study was performed in the Dutch context, this potentially limits the generalisability to other nations around the globe.

The results of this study provide a relevant example of how to assess the interplay between a dynamic national advisory document and local treatment policy making under exceptional circumstances. We think that these types of studies can help to identify leads to further enhance implementation practice of guidelines that tend to have a dynamic character. Extending the initially determined study period up to the present time could provide additional insights into the evolution of pharmacotherapy prescribing practice in a context of ongoing scientific research on the optimal treatment of COVID-19.

CONCLUSION
This study shows that, in the Netherlands, hospitals opted en masse for (hydroxy)chloroquine as COVID-19 therapy during the first 100 days of the pandemic, although the time until the treatment was no longer prescribed differed substantially. The fact that hospitals determined pharmacotherapy regimens based on their own assessment of the scientific literature, besides the national advisory document, can explain this variation. The in-hospital interviews which provided more emphasis on drug safety as well as costs in national advisory documents, together with very proactive in-hospital communication about modifications in treatment policies, could be helpful in achieving timely best evidence-based practice.

Correction notice This article has been corrected since it was published online. The last author’s middle names have been initialled.

Acknowledgements We would like to thank all the responders to the interviews who have provided details of their institutions: Dr J E Stalenhofen, OLVG Hospital, H W H A Fleuren, Canisius-Wilhelmina Hospital, C H M Kerskes, Catharina Hospital, E T Sportel, Medisch Spectrum Twente, and Dr P J de Vries, Tergooi Hospital. Furthermore, we would like to thank Dr H A J M de Wit, Canisius-Wilhelmina Hospital, J B Mascalinski, Medisch Spectrum Twente and Dr R ten Broeke, Catharina Hospital for their efforts to complete and validate the hospital data.

Contributors EBU and EMWvdG designed the study. Data collection was performed by EBU. The interviews were conducted by DYFS. EBU and DYFS analysed and interpreted the data. DYFS wrote the initial draft of the manuscript draft. EBU, PvdL and EMWvdG revised and edited the manuscript. The final manuscript was approved by all authors.

Funding This study was supported by the Dutch Working Party on Antibiotic Policy (SWAB) and funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Health Research and Development (ZonMw; project no 10430042100148).

Competing interests None declared.

Patient consent for publication Not required.

Ethics approval The study was approved by the Santeen Review Board (SDB 2020–003). The need for informed consent was waived because of the retrospective nature of the study and anonymous handling of data.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

Data availability statement Data are available upon reasonable request.

Supplemental material This content has been supplied by the author(s). It has not been vetted by BMJ Publishing Group Limited (BMJ) and may not have been peer-reviewed. Any opinions or recommendations discussed are solely those of the author(s) and are not endorsed by BMJ. BMJ disclaims all liability and responsibility arising from any reliance placed on the content. Where the content includes any translated material, BMJ does not warrant the accuracy and reliability...
of the translations (including but not limited to local regulations, clinical guidelines, terminology, drug names and drug dosages), and is not responsible for any error and/or omissions arising from translation and adaptation or otherwise.

Open access This is an open access article distributed in accordance with the Creative Commons Attribution Non Commercial (CC BY-NC 4.0) license, which permits others to distribute, remix, adapt, build upon this work non-commercially, and license their derivative works on different terms, provided the original work is properly cited, an indication of whether changes were made, and the use is non-commercial. See: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/.

ORCID iDs
Elien B Uitvlugt http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0349-4873
Ewoudt M W van de Garde http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1334-2144

REFERENCES
Supplementary file 1

The editions of the national advisory document, regarding non-ICU medicinal treatment of COVID-19, of the Dutch working party on antibiotic policy. Advised and not advised drugs per edition are presented in green and red respectively. During the study period, the use of remdesivir in non-ICU wards was not advised.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drug</th>
<th>February 27</th>
<th>March 08</th>
<th>March 20</th>
<th>May 01</th>
<th>June 07</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chloroquine</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hydroxychloroquine</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lopinavir/ritonavir</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ribavirin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interferons</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favipiravir</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oseltamivir</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darunavir</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azithromycin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zinc</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interview-guide COVID -19

Introduction

1. Development: How was the COVID-19 pharmacotherapy policy in your hospital established?
   • Which caregivers were involved?
   • Was a special group formed to determine the pharmacotherapy policy (+ power / influence)?
   • How did the consultation take place?
   • Which sources were used? / What was the policy based on?
   • What was the role of the SWAB advisory document?
   • When and how often were there updates?

2. Implementation: How did the implementation of the COVID-19 pharmacotherapy policy in your hospital take place?
   • How were prescribers notified?
   • How was it ensured that the policy was adhered to in daily practice?
   • How were changes to the policy communicated?
   • Were one or more persons appointed to coordinate the implementation of the policy?

3. Evaluation: How did the evaluation of the COVID-19 pharmacotherapy policy take place?
   • Were there any deviations from the policy? If so why and when?
   • Was there a clinical evaluation of the pharmacotherapy policy?
   • What went well in the implementation process of the hospital policy?
   • What are areas for improvement?
Table 1: Hospital experiences and suggestions for improvement regarding the development and implementation of COVID-19 treatment policies and the national advisory document

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups of determinants</th>
<th>Hospital experiences</th>
<th>Suggestions for improvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The guideline</strong></td>
<td>Hospital policies were mainly based on the national advisory document, because it summarize all relevant scientific literature (n=6)</td>
<td>Expand the national advisory document with information regarding specific patient groups, e.g. renal impairment and dialysis (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The national advisory document is merely comprised of treatment suggestions. Translation to the local clinical setting was therefore necessary (n=5)</td>
<td>Consider medicinal shortages and costs in treatment advices of the national advisory document as well (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The national advisory document was directly used as hospital policy (n=1)</td>
<td>Evaluate the medicinal safety of off-label treatments in collaboration with the Dutch pharmacovigilance centre (Lareb) (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hospital assessed scientific literature besides the national advisory document due to rapidly evolving scientific insights (n=6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The organization</strong></td>
<td>The development and implementation of policies were performed by an already existing multidisciplinary antimicrobiological team (n=3) or a newly formed team (n=3)</td>
<td>COVID-19 affects almost all wards. Prevent tension and incomprehension between wards by harmonising tasks and expectations (n=2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participants of the multidisciplinary team were: infection disease specialists (n=6), pulmonologists (n=6), hospital pharmacists (n=6), microbiologists (n=5), intensivists (n=4), internists (n=3), first aid doctors (n=1) and geriatricians (n=1)</td>
<td>Harmonise regional COVID-19 approach, because patients are transferred between hospitals (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequent (ad hoc) meetings were held to formulate policies rapidly (n=6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Decisions were made rapidly and easily because all healthcare was solely focussed on COVID-19 (n=5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The users of</strong></td>
<td>Electronic health record order sets were developed to ease the prescription of COVID-19 medication (n=6)</td>
<td>Communicate adjustments in hospital policies to all users, including non-prescribers, for example users who are responsible for updating order sets parallel to policy adjustments (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Changes in hospital policies were actively communicated to the users by means of internal website (n=5), email/newsletter (n=4), quality system (n=3), lectures (n=1) and multidisciplinary consultation (n=1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hospital policies were widely supported by prescribers due to the COVID-19 focus of all healthcare providers (n=6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Supplementary file 1

The editions of the national advisory document, regarding non-ICU medicinal treatment of COVID-19, of the Dutch working party on antibiotic policy. Advised and not advised drugs per edition are presented in green and red respectively. During the study period, the use of remdesivir in non-ICU wards was not advised.
Interview-guide COVID-19

Introduction

1. Development: How was the COVID-19 pharmacotherapy policy in your hospital established?
   - Which caregivers were involved?
   - Was a special group formed to determine the pharmacotherapy policy (+ power / influence)?
   - How did the consultation take place?
   - Which sources were used? / What was the policy based on?
   - What was the role of the SWAB advisory document?
   - When and how often were there updates?

2. Implementation: How did the implementation of the COVID-19 pharmacotherapy policy in your hospital take place?
   - How were prescribers notified?
   - How was it ensured that the policy was adhered to in daily practice?
   - How were changes to the policy communicated?
   - Were one or more persons appointed to coordinate the implementation of the policy?

3. Evaluation: How did the evaluation of the COVID-19 pharmacotherapy policy take place?
   - Were there any deviations from the policy? If so why and when?
   - Was there a clinical evaluation of the pharmacotherapy policy?
   - What went well in the implementation process of the hospital policy?
   - What are areas for improvement?
Table 1
Hospital experiences and suggestions for improvement regarding the development and implementation of COVID-19 treatment policies and the national advisory document

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups of determinants</th>
<th>Hospital experiences</th>
<th>Suggestions for improvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The guideline</td>
<td>Hospital policies were mainly based on the national advisory document, because it summarize all relevant scientific literature (n=6)</td>
<td>Expand the national advisory document with information regarding specific patient groups, e.g. renal impairment and dialysis (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The national advisory document is merely comprised of treatment suggestions. Translation to the local clinical setting was therefore necessary (n=5)</td>
<td>Consider medicinal shortages and costs in treatment advices of the national advisory document as well (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The national advisory document was directly used as hospital policy (n=1)</td>
<td>Evaluate the medicinal safety of off-label treatments in collaboration with the Dutch pharmacovigilance centre (Lareb) (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hospital assessed scientific literature besides the national advisory document due to rapidly evolving scientific insights (n=6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The organization</td>
<td>The development and implementation of policies were performed by an already existing multidisciplinary antimicrobiological team (n=3) or a newly formed team (n=3)</td>
<td>COVID-19 affects almost all wards. Prevent tension and incomprehension between wards by harmonising tasks and expectations (n=2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participants of the multidisciplinary team were: infection disease specialists (n=6), pulmonologists (n=6), hospital pharmacists (n=6), microbiologists (n=5), intensivists (n=4), internists (n=3), first aid doctors (n=1) and geriatricians (n=1)</td>
<td>Harmonise regional COVID-19 approach, because patients are transferred between hospitals (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequent (ad hoc) meetings were held to formulate policies rapidly (n=6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Decisions were made rapidly and easily because all healthcare was solely focussed on COVID-19 (n=5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The users of</td>
<td>Electronic health record order sets were developed to ease the prescription of COVID-19 medication (n=6)</td>
<td>Communicate adjustments in hospital policies to all users, including non-prescribers, for example users who are responsible for updating order sets parallel to policy adjustments (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Changes in hospital policies were actively communicated to the users by means of internal website (n=5), email/newsletter (n=4), quality system (n=3), lectures (n=1) and multidisciplinary consultation (n=1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hospital policies were widely supported by prescribers due to the COVID-19 focus of all healthcare providers (n=6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>