

The evolution of Positive Health in the Netherlands: A decade of transformation

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Introduction

Positive Health is a new concept of health with a holistic, broad vision on health. This approach extends beyond the traditional medical model by emphasising resilience, meaningfulness, and the ability to adapt. Over the past decade, the Netherlands has played a pioneering role in developing and implementing this concept. This article provides an overview of its origins, its practical applications, and its development over the past ten years.

Origins of Positive Health in the Netherlands

The concept of Positive Health was introduced by Dutch researcher and former GP Machteld Huber. It started with a personal search towards perspectives on health in the time that Dr Huber was severely ill herself. She decided to start with research about health. Her work challenged the conventional definition of health, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1948. Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. The WHO definition of health as complete wellbeing is no longer fit for purpose given the rise of chronic disease. Machteld Huber together with 37 scientists worldwide, stated that health is not just the absence of disease, but is mainly about taking control of one's own life and dealing with physical, emotional and social challenges in life. It is about resilience and meaningful living. The request for operationalization of this concept by the Netherlands Organisation for Health Research and Development (ZonMw) was valuable. Positive Health is the elaboration of a proposed concept for 'health' – an alternative to the WHO definition of health ("How do we define Health?" BMJ 2011, cited 4000 times). (1) In a mixed method

study, patients in particular (575) had a very broad view of health indicators ('health is about life as a whole'). The researchers followed their opinion because in healthcare 'the patient is central'. This research about the broad context-sensitive approach led to the development of the Positive Health framework and reflection tool, which consists of six dimensions: bodily functions, mental well-being, meaningfulness, quality of life, social participation, and daily functioning. (2)

Application of Positive Health in Healthcare and Society

One of the key characteristics of Positive Health is its focus on a person-centred approach. Instead of concentrating solely on disease management, healthcare professionals engage patients in conversations about their overall well-being and what truly matters to them. The "spider web" reflection tool gives a visual representation how satisfied people are on six areas of life, we call it the dimensions of health. (3) It supports individuals to assess their own well-being. People identify in the 'alternative dialogue' what is important and what small steps they can make towards a healthier and meaningful life. (4, 5) The "spider web" is not an instrument to 'score with', but an invitation to conversation and reflection. It invites you to really see the other person and to approach health in all its dimensions. It provides insight, overview and perspective. It enables conversations that would otherwise not be held. And it creates space for looking differently, acting differently and working together differently for patients and professionals, policymakers, administrators and in the regions.

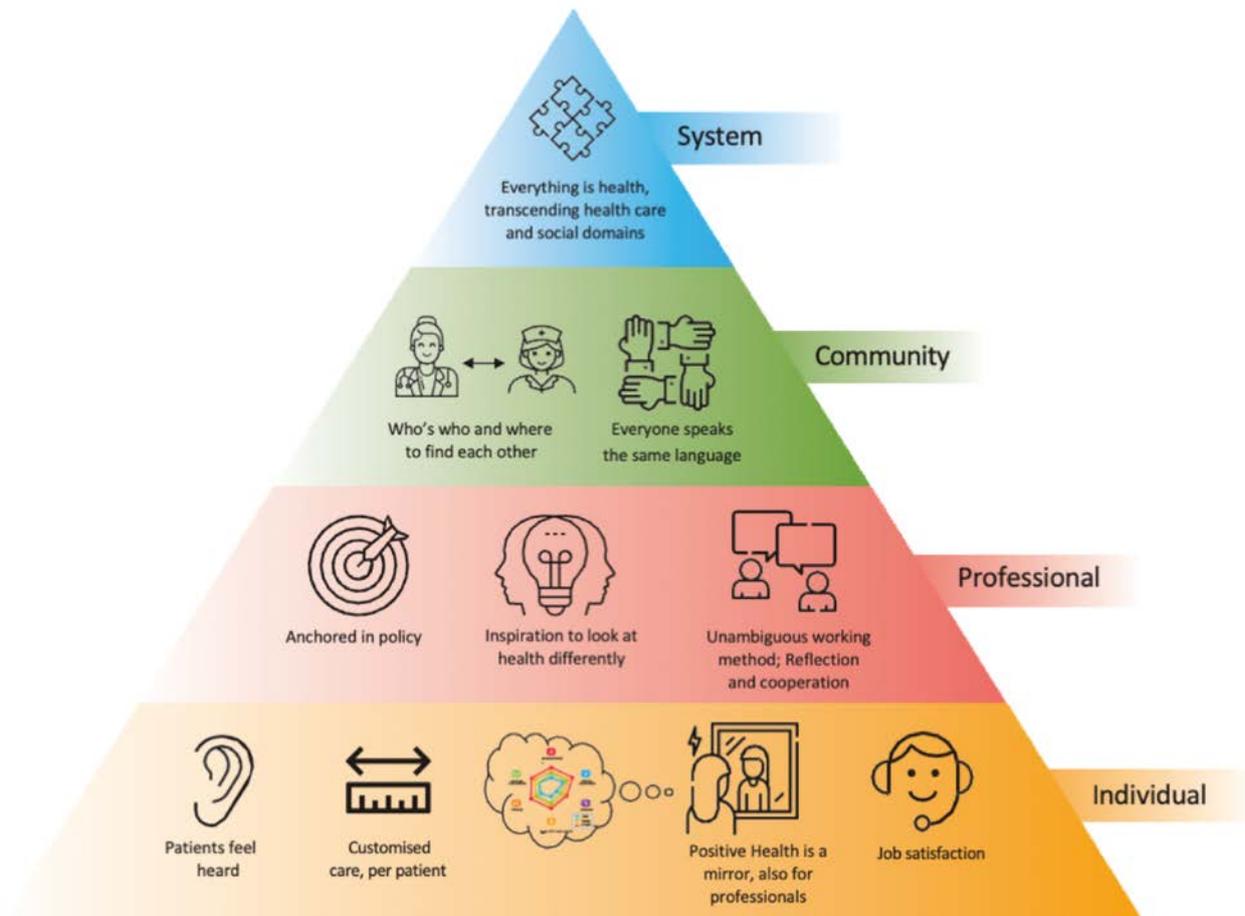


Fig 1. The different levels of applications of Positive Health and benefits of 10 years Positive Health in the Netherlands. (source: Handbook Positive Health (4))

Positive Health can be applied on individual level (in one on one conversations), but also on practice/organizational, community and regional level. (4) It has been widely embraced in a variety of targetgroups, in primary and pediatric care, (5-7-9) mental health services (10) and social care. In the Dutch primary care most of the GP's know about Positive Health as person oriented care method and about 20% of the Dutch GP's had training. An active group of pediatricians performed research among children with chronic diseases. Over the last years it has also found applications in public health, education, and employment sectors, fostering a multidisciplinary approach to well-being. (11,12) The Dutch government and healthcare organisations have increasingly integrated Positive Health into policy frameworks, recognising its potential to enhance quality of life and reduce the burden on healthcare systems. (13) Recently a rapid review has been published, with a scientific literature review of the current state of knowledge about Positive Health as introduced by Huber and colleagues. A total of 55 articles were included, about the conceptualisation of Positive Health, the ways to measure the effects of PH interventions and the application and elaboration of the Positive Health method in various settings and populations. The results from the rapid review highlight the transformative potential of Positive Health in shifting from a disease oriented to a health-oriented paradigm of healthcare. (14) The broad, holistic concept of Positive Health

already produces many beautiful things in practice: It opens perspectives, it supports collaboration and the shared language on collective levels connects people and moves systems.

The Development of Positive Health Over the Past Decade

The adoption of Positive Health in the Netherlands has seen significant milestones:

- ◆ **2012:** Introduction of the concept by Machteld Huber, supported by research funded by ZonMw, the Dutch national research institute. (15)
- ◆ **2015:** Establishment of the Institute for Positive Health (iPH) to promote and develop the concept further. (16)
- ◆ **2016-2019:** Implementation in pilot projects across various healthcare settings, including general practices and hospitals. (5-7, 13)
- ◆ **2021** Launch of Handbook Positive Health in primary care, in Dutch and English, in 2024 in German
- ◆ **2020-2024:** Expansion into public health policies and municipal strategies, with regions like Limburg leading large-scale adoption efforts. (13, 15, 17-19).
- ◆ **2022:** Establishment of the Positive Health international (PHi) organisation to promote and develop Positive Health outside

the Netherlands with training and implementation support. (20)

- ◆ **2024** – now: Broadening of implementation with Positive Health – new narratives in health. (21,22)

Studies and evaluations have demonstrated the effectiveness of Positive Health in improving patient engagement, reducing medicalisation, and fostering intersectoral collaboration. In a PhD research project about transition the innovation with Positive Health as new concept in health seemed to be a successful transition in Healthcare in the Netherlands. (18,19) The development mechanisms for transformative innovation and implementation were explored in the case of Positive Health and summarize the core of different typologies: growing, replicating, partnering, instrumentalizing and embedding. (19) With inspirational lectures, presentations and workshops, Positive Health got widely known. Partnering is about pooling resources, competences and capacities, in the field of training, research and implementation processes. Within communities collaborations started with professionals out of the medical and social domain with shared language and framework. The starting point is to seek synergy and commonality, co-creation and cooperation with intrinsically motivated people or partner organizations. The stakeholders who understand the added value of Positive Health facilitated conditions for implementation and created step by step Positive Health projects and networks With the adoption of Positive Health at regime level in regional networks, provinces and in the National Health Policy Memorandum 2020-2024 Positive Health has been further embedded in the Dutch health care system. (14)

International development

The concept has gained more and more international interest over the last years. "Positive Health international" (PHi) training and implementation organisation has been founded to maintain the essence and quality of the Positive Health movement from the Netherlands and adapt to culture and country specific needs. Positive Health could be part of the solution of the global health challenges we are facing today. In a pan-european project about new narratives for the future of the healthcare (20, 21), working from out of the concept of Positive Health could be a gamechanger, for more humanity, trust, connection, simplicity and workpleasure for the future healthcare workers. In more and more European countries (Belgium, Germany, Iceland, Portugal, Ireland, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Switzerland, Austria) and also in Colombia and Japan early adaptors are exploring the applicability of Positive Health within their healthcare systems. (22-24).

With the experiences in a variety of countries we collect intercultural feedback, pitfalls and success factors. The focus on empowering people and meaningful living is powerful. Without training the mindset change towards health oriented care seems difficult. Also academics sometimes discuss about the validi-



Präsentation des Handbuch Positive Gesundheit; Barbara Piper (training), Hans-Peter Jung, Machteld Huber und Karolien van den Brekel-Dijkstra (von links nach rechts)

ty of the measurement tool. The spiderweb is an reflection and dialogue tool and not a measurement tool, although with new research with 17 of the 44 aspects an underlying measurement version has been developed (14). Is there evidence that Positive Health works? From the start, IPH in the Netherlands has developed a Knowledge Agenda with researchers, (care) professionals and citizens (www.iph.nl/kennisagenda). This includes all publications and reports on Positive Health and the research wishes. Systematic evaluation takes time, international collaboration on Positive Health innovation research can contribute to this wish. Recently, the use of the 'Kindtool' was evaluated by the WKZ and found to be very positive ((8). This is how the body of evidence grows. Gradually, related theories come more into focus. Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory, but Nussbaum's Capability Approach also fits well. As far as we are concerned, the approach of Positive Health deserves time to grow and mature and we keep developing the concept.

The Power of Positive Health

The "spider web" is intended as a mirror with which someone can assess themselves. The scale of 1-10 challenges you to really reflect. And then we do not guide the conversation with 'scientifically substantiated questions', but ask very open questions: 'What do you think is important, what would you possibly like to change and what would be a first step?' In this way we connect with someone's self-knowledge and their motivation and that proves fruitful. Autonomy is created in a natural way.

As the RVS report No Evidence Without Context (25) states: good care is not only created from data, but also from values, stories and professional wisdom. In this time of transition, full of complexity and sometimes chaos, it is not a matter of waiting for

'certainty', but of doing, learning and adapting. That is the power of Positive Health.

In policy, practice, research and education we see every day how this philosophy makes a difference. It is not finished, all the answers are not there yet and that is not necessary. It is not an end point, but a direction. It is a dynamic philosophy that invites cooperation, humanity and system change.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, Positive Health has transformed the Dutch healthcare landscape by promoting a more holistic and person-centred approach to well-being. Its integration into medical practice, policy, and society demonstrates its potential to enhance resilience and quality of life. As the concept continues to evolve, it may offer valuable insights for other healthcare systems seeking to adopt a more comprehensive and sustainable approach to health. By reflecting on the journey of Positive Health in the Netherlands, this article provides a foundation for further discussions on its applicability in international contexts, including Germany and beyond.

If you are interested in Handbook, or learn more
<https://positivehealth-international.com/training/>.

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Karolien van den Brekel is a general practitioner in Utrecht, the Netherlands, interested in innovation and prevention and applies Positive Health in her practice on a daily basis. With Positive Health she delivers personalized care which gives her a lot of work pleasure. She worked and lived 10 years abroad where she did research, obtained her doctorate in gynaecology and general practice in Utrecht and New York and got experience in general practices in Germany (Munich) and Ireland. She did an international coaching training while living in Japan with her family. The time abroad gave her not only wonderful new life experiences but also resilience and a broad perspective on health.

It is Karolien's ambition to contribute to health transformation international as director of Positive Health international, trainer, educator of Positive Health and author of the Handbook Positive Health in Primary Care, the Dutch example. She has been active in Germany from 2022 to train groups of German colleagues in applying Positive Health in daily practice.



Quelle: Autorin