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Providing optimal care for frail elderly people: development of an integrated care pathway by GP's and community nurses.

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Background & Aim: in the Netherlands, the number of frail elderly is growing fast. When care is needed, it is in most cases complex, and requires intensive cooperation between general practitioners, nurses and other professionals, and the elderly and their caregivers. Therefore, the Dutch College of General Practitioners and the Dutch professional organization of nurses V&VN made a nationwide agreement on co-operation and exchange of information in the care for frail elderly in the community.

Method: The agreement was formulated with a working group consisting of general practitioners, community nurses, a specialist in geriatric medicine, a social worker and a representative of the governing organization for associations of the elderly. After having formulated starting points, this working group made agreements on: patient-centered care, focus on quality of life, communication, coordination of care, case-finding, advanced care planning, shared-decision making and ways to stimulate a proactive attitude among caregivers.

Results: The agreement provides tools for professionals to improve their co-operation. In addition, the tools should enhance the overall experience of elderly people with the care they are receiving, supporting them in living independently and ultimately to improve their quality of life. We described conditions how to provide the best medical care aiming at the quality of life of the patient by the most appropriate caregiver, and how to assure continuity of care. Issues open to discussion are how to further improve the co-operation and exchange of information between health care providers, and what we can learn from other countries in order to improve the care for frail elderly living at home.

Message: Good care for frail elderly in the community needs good coordination and clear arrangements on tasks and responsibilities. A nationwide agreement between GP's and community nurses, made up in close cooperation with other relevant professionals, will contribute to the best possible care for this vulnerable group of people.