Health Care Executives’ Professionalism in-between Politics and Professionals

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Abstract

Health care executives are not only forced to do specific and often contradictory things – most prominently by politicians and counteracted by professionals – but are also forced to take stances and fill ‘governance gaps’ in changing institutional settings. Increasingly, this gave rise to an entrepreneurial discourse: health care executives are expected to act ‘entrepreneurially’. This is contradicted as well, especially in countries like The Netherlands, which also expect public and non-profit executives to act in the ‘public’s interest’. This paper explores how health care executives cope – how they work in-between political, professional and public pressures, and how they establish new forms of managerial professionalism. This will be analyzed by studying how executives themselves frame management and construe executive roles and relations. More particularly, four empirical questions will be answered. How do they perceive (changing) contexts? How do executive contexts – in terms of educational and organizational contexts – change? How do they talk about their work? What do they actually do? Answers are provided on the basis of extensive survey research. On the grounds of two (comparable) surveys that were sent to 900 members of the Dutch Association of Health Care Executives in 2000 and 2005 (returned by around 400 executives), dominant images of health care management will be presented, and changing talk and actions will be traced. We will show that work is increasingly framed as ‘entrepreneurial’, but also that daily practices are dominated by professional and organizational forces. We will conclude that health care executives increasingly search for ‘intermediary’ roles, which enable them to mediate between politics, professionals and publics. Finally, the rise of ‘managerial professionalism’ will be discussed. Apparently, ‘professional’ health care executives are able to accept entrepreneurial rhetoric, yet resist entrepreneurial realities. How they do this, and how it contributes to legitimacy remains to be seen.

Key words: Health care management, health care executives, governance, professionalization