

Dutch health minister is quizzed about “intensive” contact with tobacco industry

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The Dutch health minister Edith Schippers has come under pressure from MPs, doctors, and anti-smoking groups to clarify her contacts with the tobacco industry after a critical television documentary entitled *Minister of Tobacco*.

The documentary programme *Zembla* featured camera interviews with tobacco industry lobbyists and pro-smoking campaigners and quoted emails sent by Mrs Schippers. They concluded that since becoming an MP in 2003 Mrs Schippers has had “intensive” contact with the tobacco industry (www.zembla.vara.nl).

Last year Mrs Schippers became minister of health and told MPs that as health spokesperson for the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) she had spoken to the tobacco lobby maybe “two or three times.”

But the Dutch Smoking Tobacco Association (Vereniging Nederlandse Kerftabak) told *Zembla* it got to know Mrs Schippers “intensively” while an MP, holding “one on one meetings” with her.

The campaign that succeeded in getting the smoking ban lifted from small cafes without employees also says it enjoyed “good contact” and emails of support from Mrs Schippers. The documentary revealed too that ministry of health civil servants this year visited a tobacco factory, which MPs argue is contrary to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control that the Netherlands signed in 2005.

The ministry of health declined to take part in the documentary. The programme sparked questions in parliament from Labour MP Lea Bouwmeester who called for a list of all meetings between Mrs Schippers’s department and the tobacco industry. She told MPs that *Zembla* seemed to show that the advisors of the ministry of health are the tobacco industry.

Mrs Schippers has agreed to provide a list of contacts with the tobacco industry and with organisations opposed to smoking. In reply to MPs’ questions she said: “I don’t say I have never spoken to them but I have kept my distance from the tobacco industry. Not because they do anything illegal, they pay taxes,

they operate within the law, but because of my liberal principles I have a completely different interest than industry.”

She told MPs that her government took a “middle path.” We discourage smoking but allow “adults to decide for themselves over lifestyle decisions.” Mrs Schippers has previously stressed that “the state is not a nanny.”

Her libertarian policies were attacked in the documentary by tobacco control experts. As well as scrapping the smoking ban for small cafes, Mrs Schippers has reversed the previous government’s decision to reimburse a Stop Smoking Programme through basic health insurance and cancelled mass media anti-smoking campaigns.

A study by Maastricht University and Stivoro, the expert centre for tobacco prevention, estimates that these policies will result in an extra 600 deaths by 2020 (<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1360-0443.2011.03642.x/abstract>).

Onno Van Schayck, professor in preventive medicine at the university and a member of the government’s senior scientific advisers, the Dutch Health Council, told the programme: “It is disconcerting that a health minister is more worried about [government] meddling with smokers than with healthcare. Tens of thousands of people die in the Netherlands because of smoking.”

The Dutch Cancer Society subsequently said it believed the government had allowed itself to be led by the pro-smoking lobby and hoped that in future Mrs Schippers would put tobacco control first.

A spokesman for the minister said as an MP Mrs Schippers had far more contact with the anti-smoking lobby, but there was nothing wrong with politicians and civil servants being informed about the tobacco industry. “In order to adopt a position they should be informed by all parties,” he said. He stressed the present government had spent more on prevention but chose to target this to informing young people on the risks of addiction.

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