Speech by Professor Bart Berden
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank you for the invitation!

Today we are in the midst of a global crisis. Without a clear sight we have to take difficult and important decisions; decisions that will shape our world for the years to come. This holds true for the future of our healthcare, for example the balance between efficiency and flexibility. But also for our future economy, our politics and our culture. There is an immediate urgency to overcome the day-to-day threats and this is unique: I personally have seen how we took decisions in very short terms, decisions that normally would take years of deliberation and discussion.

But that's not all. Our challenge with making decisions now is to take into account the world we will live in, after this crisis is overcome. And I’m sure we will! An impressive example is the use of IT as your university being able to implement online teaching overnight! As in healthcare were we initiated digital consultation in stead of the well known physical encounter. In only 3 weeks we converted 50 percent of the visits of our clinic. An impressive development but not matured yet: 6 months after this conversion we still haven’t been able decide what diseases, patients and care-givers will profit from which option. Scientific work to be done!

In the next minutes I’ll share some of my experiences and connect that to future policy challenges.

In the first crisis I was amazed to find out how clock speeds in the World (china vs the US), in Europe (Italy vs the Netherlands) and in the Netherlands (Brabant vs Groningen) differed. It was in the beginning of last February that we sold millions of mouth masks to China. Only 4 weeks later we had a dramatic shortage.

This is an important issue, not only in retrospect, to understand and learn from, but also for the future. As an example: if the virus is only extinguished at 70% vaccination coverage, this very complex operation will require national, international; I mean global, cooperation.

More than ever, we have to share information. When we received our first Corona patients in Tilburg we hardly had any information from Wuhan about the virus and how to deal with it. Although China faced our dilemmas some weeks earlier, they had no attitude, spirit or structure
to share crucial information. And we didn’t ask. We all should share information openly and humbly seek advice.

Unfortunately in Brabant we have experienced how our national focus on efficiency in health care results in little reserve capacity. We only just made it, but I can tell you honestly that I have had several scary moments. And I do mean scary moments! Thanks to coincidental regional differences, we were helped by colleagues in the Netherlands and Germany. The fact that this has led to the transporting of patients or should I say the dragging is not to be commended. Patients attach themselves to their hospital and especially to healthcare providers and vice versa. Wouldn't it be better if we had a flexible shell of deployable staff? Pooling medical personnel being send to the worst-hit regions in the world in order to help and in order to gain valuable experience. An interesting perspective!

As in the 2008 financial crisis and the 2014 Ebola pandemic crisis I hope that the international community is able to execute a global plan of action. The changing of the guard in the US could be a hopeful sign.

Back to our country. How did we manage the crisis? On a national level we mixed science and policymaking. The famous Outbreak Management Team consisted of scientists and was requested to discuss and formulate evidence based advise the policy makers. Because of the aforementioned mixing there was no insight in the scientific assumptions and facts that were used. Nor how these insights led to the concrete advices. For the people this mixing made it impossible to follow the steps that led to the meaningful recommendations. Impossible to gain insight into the degree of contamination between science and politics, for example on wearing mouth masks. Unfortunately, this non-transparency has been maintained to this very day. The question is how effective cooperation between science and policy in future should look like.

During the current second crisis we, that is the workers in healthcare, remain convinced of the seriousness of the virus and have become increasingly amazed by the attitude of the public. I see how this seriously demotivates our workers and partly also made them bitter. It is clear that our compliance is a serious challenge. How can we make the people comply better?

The government of some countries monitors people and punishes them for breaking the rules. Today’s technology with sensors, powerful algorithms and user-friendly app’s, makes it possible to monitor every citizen. China uses one’s smartphone to monitor, has hundreds of millions face recognizing cameras, obliges citizens to check and report their medical condition and is gaining huge amounts of data. Although our Dutch Corona app compares poorly with this, the Corona crisis is introducing a new phase, in which mass surveillance is normalized. A so called tipping point. This future could make the 2018 Cambridge analytics look like a small rookie mistake.
But, is this the right way to go? And will it work in our country? Shouldn’t we rely on the cooperation of the well-informed and responsible individual? When they are told the scientific facts, when they trust the public authorities and when they are motivated, citizens can do the right thing and comply to the standards and guidelines. Trust being the backbone: citizens need to trust the public authorities, trust science and trust the media.

This is not in line with the message of some politicians, for example in the US, but also in our country, who vigorously and continuously have undermined such trust. It is no coincidence that these politicians have confidence in the aforementioned Big Brother approach. I hope you to allow me to leave the antivaxers and conspiracy thinkers out of consideration.

Promoting and safeguarding trust in science is a sacred but difficult task for universities. That is, in addition to researching engagement of people, aimed at improving compliance.

Trust is known to take years to build, seconds to break and forever to repair. But, this Corona crisis has also shown me the opposite. The various emergencies have revealed me a hidden reservoir of trust, dedication and togetherness, resulting in a rush to help each other.

Sooner than expected the aforementioned new and powerful technologies could help us to make better informed personal choices. They could help to understand, follow and judge the standard and guidelines being given to us. Not only the authorities monitoring us, but also the opposite: us monitoring the authorities.

I mentioned the importance of our recent experiences for the future of health care. As an important example I would, in brief, discuss the future of regulated competition in Dutch healthcare. When the crisis increased, policymaking was largely centralized, including the use of the OMT, I just mentioned. Various national centers were installed; for the distribution of patient, for facemasks, for testing etc.

The Corona crisis definitely put the model of regulated competition out of action, also being true for for health insurers. As it was for the the hospitals and other care organizations: our close and open cooperation was and is a critical succes factor in mastering the crisis.

So, does regulated competition has a bleak future? That’s to early to say, although the party programs for the next elections of our political parties are already advancing it. A new design should, definitely, encourage and facilitate cooperation. and besides, what are the alternative options? I would say an exciting and relevant development, craving for an intelligent consideration. Not as in an intelligent lock down, by the way...
Science must and can make an important contribution to further developments. It is an impetus to enter into new and maintain existing partnerships and alliances. In line with this I am very satisfied by the collaboration between your university and our hospital, called we care.

Ladies and gentlemen, for Tilburg University the CoV crisis offers many opportunities for the various faculties and research groups. It is neither the place nor the time to work out.

However on an aggregated level, there is one consideration that I would like to pass on to the new helmsmen of the Tilburg university. Wouldn’t this be a great opportunity to focus more than ever on social sciences? In my opinion, the nature of the existing questions would justify that.