

Speech H.J. Smid

Reflection on the dies natalis lecture of prof.dr. Pieter van 't Veer, Wageningen University by Henk J. Smid (ZonMw - The Hague), March 9, 2007.

My food, our food?

Mr. Rector Magnificus, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for your invitation to reflect upon the Wageningen University and Research Centre and the theme of the dies lecture My food, our food from the perspective of ZonMw. From my personal perspective I would like to add a question mark to the title: My food, our food? Why? If my food would be our food, meaning if you would eat what I choose to eat, we would all adhere to a vegetarian diet. This would mean that part of the Wageningen University and Research Centre, for instance the animal sciences group, might become redundant. But please don't take this remark too serious.

Today I represent ZonMw, the Netherlands Organisation for Health Research and Development. I know that our former chairwoman Guusje ter Horst was your first choice to give a reflection upon the dies natalis lecture of Pieter van 't Veer. However, shortly after your invitation she was asked for a higher profession, minister of Internal Affairs, of which we are of course very proud (SHEET 2). I am not sure whether or not there is a causal relation between your invitation and her new appointment, but surely it can be said that you made a very good choice. I feel honoured to replace her here today and I am delighted to reflect on the dies natalis lecture of prof. Pieter van 't Veer.

ZonMw as independent intermediary organisation of the ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports and the Netherlands organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) promotes the dynamics and the combination of health research, health care and health policy. ZonMw is an organisation for programming and financing research, development and implementation. We stand for both high quality research and high quality innovations in care. These innovations in principle should only be implemented if they are proven to be effective and usable. ZonMw links the different stages of generated knowledge from basic research to nationwide implementation. Together the stages constitute the so-called knowledge chain, (SHEET 3) which starts with basic research and ends with implementation into practise.

Nutrition is an integral part of life and health. Isn't it true that we often ask: What's for dinner today? This is also the title of a very recent report, actually it is finished today, by ZonMw and the Wageningen University as project leaders, a programming study into Nutrition and Health commissioned by the ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports and the ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality. We expect this report to prelude a more intensive co-operation of research institutes, linking of alpha, beta and gamma sciences to answer the complex problems underlying the choice of healthy foods and life style, to a better structured and accessible database of research projects, to the tackling of topics like determinants of food choice behaviour, functionality of food, chronic diseases. With these themes emerging societal problems like the ageing population, prevention of chronic diseases in children will be addressed. And because nutrition is part of health I would also state that co-operation with the university medical centres should be enhanced. This could grow into a nation wide initiative on Nutrition and Health and we strongly advise the ministries to go forward and to really transfer moral support into cash! Having said all this I am the first to admit that food research is a very complex issue. There are so many variables at stake, often on a long time scale, that I often wonder how research can be done at all. Here I would like to pay full tribute to all the creative scientists who have been able to develop intellectual challenging research methodology in this field.

Nutrition is an integral part of life and health and therefore it is also part of many programmes of ZonMw. Nutrition has a long-standing history within ZonMw. 50 years ago the researchers in the field of nutrition sciences decided that they would benefit from a co-ordinating structure. They decided to apply for the status of a working group [werkgemeenschap] within NWO. Although the NWO formally dismissed these working groups, the working group on Nutrition kept going on meeting each other every year. Sociologists would call this constructive obstruction, I believe! This working group still receives some incentive from ZonMw to organise this annual meeting where researchers from universities, research institutes and the industry meet.

I would like to draw your attention to the next exercise I performed during preparation of this speech. I selected all text of Pieter van 't Veer lecture excluding the word Wageningen and put this in the ZonMw search machine to look what type of projects and ZonMw programmes would fit with this profile. It came out that the description of the ZonMw program Justified Nutrition (Verantwoorde Voeding) matches 46% of the lecture followed by Healthy Living (29%), Nutrition and Chronic diseases (27%), Academic Workplaces Public Health (21%) and Culture and Health (21%). And there are many more of the 70 programs of ZonMw with which this text matches, which means that for the Wageningen University there is a wide variety of opportunities to apply for grants at ZonMw.

Ladies and gentlemen, please allow me to reflect a bit further on food science and society. A very important element in this relation is diversity of the population and the impact of nutrition on health and quality of life. Diversity elements like age, gender, health and disability, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, all deserve adequate attention. This will lead to evidence based interventions targeted for specific

groups. I am fully aware that we are creating more complexity in research design but society demands to put more emphasis on these different groups. But there is also a scientific justification for this, namely to increase the external validity.

This will also guarantee a better implementation into daily practise. Science might go faster than we think. We might end with the diversity between individuals rather than diversity between groups.

I am very happy to see that the Wageningen UR is dedicated to provide sound evidence for guidelines for a healthy diet. We all know from the recent report of the Health Council that evidence in this sector is very scarce.

Only the relationship between sugar use and tooth caries is stated to be proven. So to quote a title in the British Medical Journal of February 24 Give us food sense, not nonsense! Here we also enter the realm of health policy. Correct me if I am mistaken, but it is my perception that health policy with regard to food is a topic for research too, so that is e.g. research about the decision making process.

As said before life, health, nutrition are in itself complex matters. So food scientists should co-operate with other experts and organisations. Nowadays we have more tools (email, mobiles, teleconference, transportation) to co-operate with our fellows all over the world and join each other to make the complexity simpler. That's why I would like to put instead of the 2 F's of prof. Pieter van 't Veer (French Fries) the 3 P's (People, Planet, Prosperity).

The strategy of Wageningen University and Research Centre and the theme Nutrition, Health and Behaviour are very much in line with the 3P's. A multidisciplinary approach linking natural and biomedical sciences to social sciences, linking production to consumption or to say in another two F quote, farm to fork, transferring basic knowledge to usable strategies, linking The Netherlands to Europe. And this all with strong emphasis on sustainability. Your choice to focus on Nutrition, Health and Behaviour and the integrative approach may be seen as a very good investment indeed in the future health and also prosperity of the Dutch population.

But not only of the Dutch because Wageningen University also aims at creating a European Network of Excellence named Restaurant of the Future. This seems a great initiative to me, being wined and dined according to the newest insights on healthy, affordable, palatable and safe foods all produced in a sustainable way. I might suggest you create a global restaurant chain McWag(eningen) (SHEET 4) so that not only the Europeans may benefit from this excellent idea.

Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, in the course of this speech I presented the knowledge chain with regard to food research. In that chain I showed were science and society meet.

I also spoke about the triple relation of science, society and policy (SHEET 5). And I hope to have been able to ensure all of you that my organisation will strongly promote a healthy food research programme in the very near future.

Finally, I would like to congratulate you with this 89th dies natalis. In preparing the report on Nutrition and Health, What are we going to eat? We have also identified the topic of metabolic imprinting during pregnancy and early life. Nutrition may be an important factor in metabolic imprinting and susceptibility to chronic disease. Therefore I am interested to know what food the mother and perhaps also the father of the Wageningen University and Research Centre used that contributed to this very vital and well regarded senior citizen of the research and education community. I heard that you are very successful in the Framework programs of the European Commission indeed. An ageing citizen who is continuously able to adept to changes, who is thinking and acting globally and is surrounded by off spring locally. A booming family that will feed itself with evidence based meals and lead a healthy life in social interaction with other families. And I am sure you will provide us all with knowledge and products so that we can choose our food and I can choose my food well informed.

Thank you for your attention.

