

In September 1988 Wija van Staveren was appointed as Professor in Nutrition and Gerontology at the Division of Human Nutrition of Wageningen University (led by Professor Hautvast). Science, government and industry became interested in nutrition, because of a sharp rise in the size of the aged population. The consequences of this sharp rise for health, society and economy are well known. The focus of the first chair 'Nutrition and Ageing' was to investigate the relation of nutrition and healthy ageing, and less so on nutrition and longevity.

However, who are the elderly people and what are their nutritional needs? In the early nineties there were no nutrient recommendations for people 65 years and over nor for the oldest old. The first step clearly was to try to fill that gap. The SENECA (Survey in Europe on Nutrition and the Elderly: a Concerted Action) study in 1989 was initiated to relate food intake and health in men and women aged 70-80 years. From this explorative study, turning later on into a longitudinal study, we observed that the pace of aging differs within individuals (young eyes versus old ears) and between categories of elderly people: from, successful via normal to accelerated ageing. In SENECA we dealt mostly with "normal ageing", for "successful ageing" we studied physically active agers and "accelerated ageing" we observed in nursing homes, where residents often suffer from chronic diseases and disabilities.

All these studies informed us about risk-nutrients in elderly people. They also revealed that functionality of different organs was a relevant endpoint in research next to the health outcomes we addressed in earlier studies. This was the starting point for Lisette de Groot, the successor of Wija van Staveren. She was appointed to study more into depth the physiology of ageing, including genetics. She developed a new vision on studying the ageing process. The posters of the PhD students will give you a look into that work during the program breaks.

During this symposium "25 years nutrition and ageing at Wageningen University", we will explain how the focus and the methodology have changed in our research from observing food patterns and the relationship with health to the contribution of food components to functionality in old age. Last but not least, the consequences for dietary guidelines and the implementation in different groups of elderly people will be discussed.

Quote WHO:

The ideal situation of healthy ageing was described as the situation in which people survive to an advanced age with their vigour and functional independence maintained, and morbidity and disability compressed into a relatively short period before death.