

Ik ben Dietist!

I am a dietitian!

In the Netherlands the profession of dietitian exists since the late thirties of the 20th century. At first dietitians were not trained in an independent course in higher education, but as an additional course to a teacher's course in domestics. The profession became really important in the Second World War when dietitians in the government food agency advised the starving population what could be eaten. For instance, they issued recipes on how to cook flower bulbs and sugar beets, which had replaced regular foods such as cabbage and potatoes, which were no longer available. In the first decades after the war an important role for dietitians in the government food agency was to advise the population how to avoid malnourishment.

During the war, the Dutch Association of Dietitians was founded. In the first years only a mere sixty dietitians were members. The training was improved and doctors, most of them internists and cardiologists, became interested in the prospect of having a dietitian giving their patients advice. Dietitians in hospitals worked in the kitchen for a large amount of their time, controlling the preparation of food in general and diets especially, many times preparing diet foods themselves.

In the late sixties dietetics became a higher education and dietitians were able to receive a paramedic degree from 1972 on. This was a major achievement in the development of the profession. Paramedic in the Netherlands is a word for professions that are specialized in a part of the medical field, such as physiotherapists, occupational therapists and speech therapists. Paramedics work independently, but on request of a medical doctor. They are responsible for their own work, but the doctor keeps the overall responsibility for the patient's health. In those years still a lot of work was to be done. Most people had no idea what a dietitian was, what her work involved, or even how to write the word without spelling mistakes!

The Dutch Association, with the help of many stakeholders, such as doctors and food scientists, but also their vast number of volunteers, worked relentlessly over the years to improve the position of the dietitians, to make their work known to the public and medical staff alike.

The Association has always worked very closely with the four Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) that train dietitians on the content of the study program, prospects for students after graduation and the necessity of sufficient practice placements. HEIs have their share in post-HEI training for dietitians in the field.

Some twenty years ago the need was felt for continuous quality improvement for dietitians. The Association noticed that some dietitians didn't keep up with new developments in treatment and gave

advice that was no longer valid, harming patients, but also the profession.

The government stimulated quality improvement among paramedic professions and the Dutch Association of Dietitians was given money to develop a quality structure for dietitians. The money was not very much, but enough for a project manager; the rest was work for volunteers. Today dietitians start collecting points after graduation by working with patients and students, following courses, writing articles or doing research, which will enable them to register in a quality register. This is a tremendous stimulation for dietitians to stay well informed.

The work field for dietitians has expanded since the start over 70 years ago. Nowadays, dietitians work in hospitals, in research, as teachers; work in the food industry in product development, but also to inform the public, or advise companies on healthy food and lifestyle. We have approximately 3000 dietitians in the Netherlands. The majority works in either hospitals or in primary care. This means in the practice of family doctors. The number of dietitians in primary care has increased considerably over the last four years, thanks to the fact that dietary treatment is covered by the basic health insurance for four hours per person per year. This financial aspect is an achievement that has been fought for very hard for very many years and we are very happy it has come to this. This success has also led to more students entering the HEIs to become dietitians.

The latest development is a growing interest in research. Dietitians enter into masters' degree courses in human nutrition or health sciences. Each year quite a few dietitians achieve a PhD.

I myself graduated in 1976 and was able to be part of the developments described. First, as a volunteer and later as member of the board of the Association for six years. I have always been working as a dietitian in primary health care and enjoy working with patients and all my colleagues from different professions. The most interesting part of our profession to me is the developments in health care and how dietitians can contribute to that. I've specialised in the treatment of overweight and obesity, and the co morbidities that they cause.

DIETS also means a lot to me, because it enables us to share experiences in our profession throughout Europe



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