Award for new concept of health

The World Health Organization’s definition of health is no longer fit for purpose. According to this definition, hardly anyone is healthy. A different concept of health, which approaches health in a dynamic way, focusing on resilience and self-management, would have implications for the goals and organisation of healthcare. Medical doctor and researcher Machteld Huber is working to make this a reality, and ZonMw has rewarded her efforts with a special award.

The problem
‘Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.’ The World Health Organization has used this definition of health since 1948. It has been highly significant in the fight against infectious disease, in particular. But rising prosperity in many parts of the world and the associated increase in both life expectancy and the incidence of chronic and age-related diseases have made this definition seem increasingly outmoded. ‘The definition represents the ideal of “complete well-being” in the absence of disease. As such, it has inadvertently promoted medicalisation’, says Machteld Huber of the Louis Bolk Institute. ‘Because people are rarely completely healthy, we should be continually concerned with striving for the absence of disease. Increasingly sophisticated diagnostics, which are capable of identifying more illnesses at an earlier and earlier stage, do increase the need for treatment.’ Huber and others wonder, for example, how important it is to strive for longer life expectancy as opposed to social participation. ‘The WHO definition refers to complete well-being, but the very fact that it is stated so absolutely makes it all the more difficult to achieve well-being. Of course disease has to be treated, but an ill person may be healthy in other ways and still have a good quality of life. The WHO definition says nothing about aspects like resilience, and control over one’s own life, which are key elements in our new concept of health. Furthermore, health should not be an end in itself, but a means to achieving a meaningful life.’ Other concepts of health have been put forward in the past, in the 1980s for example, but they never became common currency, Huber says. ‘Now it seems the time is ripe for a broader view of health.’

Progress so far
Huber has been working on a more dynamic concept of health since 2009. Following a conference on the subject which she organised on behalf of the Dutch Health Council and ZonMw in late 2009, she and a number of Dutch and international experts published a paper in July 2011 in the British Medical Journal entitled How should we define health? The paper concluded that health can be described as ‘the ability to adapt and to self-manage’ in the face of the physical, emotional and social challenges of life.
Key points of new award-winning concept of health:
- Different view of health;
- Adaptation of WHO definition of health from 1948;
- Products: new conceptual framework and indicators of health;
- Elements include 'absence of disease no longer key, greater focus on resilience and self-management, the dynamic nature of health, quality of life and social participation'.

More information Parel
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ZonMw Disease Prevention and Health Promotion programme
This project is funded under the Disease Prevention and Health Promotion programme, which is designed to help improve disease prevention and health promotion practice. The goal of the programme is to expand knowledge and foster the practical application of the knowledge already available on disease prevention and health promotion, and on effective methods, in close collaboration with professionals. The development of the new concept of health is important for ZonMw’s entire field of work, from healthcare to disease prevention. Besides administering programmes, ZonMw also sees it as its role to launch new ideas, think outside the box and pose intellectual challenges.

More information programme Prevention