ZonMw Award for new concept of health

On 20 September 2012 doctor and researcher Machteld Huber, the Louis Bolk Institute, is to receive a ZonMw award (a ‘Parel’, or ‘Pearl’) for her work on a new concept of health, which views health in terms of people’s ability to adapt and self-manage in the face of the physical, emotional and social challenges of life. This concept does not focus on health as a ‘state of complete well-being’, as the current WHO definition of health does. Pauline Meurs, chair of ZonMw, will present the award at a meeting of the Annual National Healthcare Prizes.

WHO definition no longer fit for purpose
Huber’s study was prompted by the fact that the World Health Organization’s definition is no longer fit for purpose. The WHO defines health as ‘a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’. ‘According to the 1948 definition, hardly anyone is healthy’, says Huber. ‘Of course disease has to be treated, but the WHO definition has inadvertently promoted the medicalisation of healthcare. The vast majority of the healthcare budget is currently spent on fighting disease. We shouldn’t be continually concerned with curing people, and at the same time neglect opportunities for people to lead a meaningful life.’

Resilience and self-management
A new concept of health, which approaches health in a dynamic way, focusing on resilience, self-management, quality of life and basic health skills, would have implications for the goals and organisation of healthcare. ‘Health should not be an end in itself, but a means to achieving a meaningful life’, says Huber. ‘I am calling for a shift in focus.’ This implies more attention to the psyche, a person’s mental fitness, their ability to function on a day-to-day basis, to participate in society, and also to health literacy. ‘I call this “positive health”’, says Huber.

Next step
Huber is now exploring how the new concept can be further specified for various fields of healthcare. This is a cutting-edge international initiative, which has already produced a paper in the British Medical Journal. The next steps in fleshing out the concept will also involve international collaboration.

ZonMw, the Netherlands Organisation for Health Research and Development
Progress requires research and development. ZonMw funds health research and fosters the use of the knowledge developed to help improve health and healthcare. ZonMw’s main commissioning organisations are the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports and the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). The special award (the ‘Parel’, or ‘Pearl’) is presented several times a year to ZonMw projects that can serve as an example and an inspiration to other projects funded by the organisation.

Note to editors
For further information on the award, contact Merlijn Bles (ZonMw Communication Department) on +31 (0)70 3495160, bles@zonmw.nl. For information on the project, contact Machteld Huber via Lidwien Daniels (Louis Bolk Institute Communication Department), +31 (0)343 523860, l.daniels@louisbolk.nl
An English factsheet about the award is available at www.zonmw.nl/gesondheid.