

Best Practice: A Guide for Growing Older – Letting the Environment Do the Work



Leyden Academy
ON VITALITY AND AGEING

David van Bodegom is a medical doctor and researcher at the [Leyden Academy on Vitality and Ageing](#). In 2015, he wrote a book with Professor Rudi Westendorp from the University of Copenhagen on the influence of the environment on the aging process. They studied two large groups of older people in the Netherlands and in rural Ghana. In the book, they showcase the results of their research through a case study of two people.

Hans is a 68 year old man living in the Netherlands and a patient of Dr. van Bodegom. Like many men of his age, he has high blood pressure, elevated cholesterol, and diabetes. Kwaku is 20 years older than Hans and lives in a small village in the north of Ghana. When they met, Kwaku was ploughing his field and greeted David with a firm handshake. It was immediately apparent that there was a difference in how healthy the two men were, but was this an exceptional situation and if not, how could it be explained?

The answer is that older people living in rural Ghana are healthier and fitter than people living in western countries which typically have more access to health care and advanced medicine. "Complaints associated with old age are not only aging-related but are to a large degree influenced by lifestyle. A few generations ago, people in the Netherlands and Ghana



lived in similar environments where physical activity was a part of daily life and food was scarcer than it is today. In western countries, our bodies have not caught up with the changes in our environment; as a result, we eat more than we need and exercise only when necessary," said David.

Environmental stimuli are sending the wrong message: the amount we exercise has been drastically reduced by modern inventions like escalators, cars, and washing machines. At the same time, supermarkets are filled with calorie rich food. "We are trapped in bodies that have evolved to take in as many calories as we can and waste as few as possible," said David, "and because we cannot change our genetic makeup, we need to change our environment."

Small modifications in our living environment can have long-term benefits for how we age. "We continue eating until our plate is empty rather than until we are full. People who use smaller plates to eat from consume less calories without realizing it," said David. Other simple examples can include: cycling or walking to work rather than taking the car, organizing meetings at work where people stand rather than sit, and making a shopping list before going to the supermarket, since as much as 60 percent of grocery purchases are unplanned¹.

Creating an environment where people can age in a way that stimulates more activity, healthy eating and strong social networks requires adaptations not only to where people live, work and go to school but also to public spaces, shops, and restaurants. When healthy choices are easier and more appealing, they will reduce the risk of illnesses related to old age and enable people to live a long and healthy life.

¹ *Oud Worden in de Praktijk* pp152.

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