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„Impact of Changing Food Choice and Habits on Nutritional Status in European Countries“

Task 4 **To identify priority areas of food habit research in general and for joint European research projects**

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Food Habits of special groups: the elderly

Background:

A wide range of national nutritional surveys have been launched in Germany throughout the last years (e.g. the National food consumption survey NVS, MONICA-survey, German Heart Prevention survey DHP). The statistical data gathered enabled nutritionists and dietitians to argue that the „overall“ German diet is not as wholesome as it ought to be.

The existing national nutritional data could lead to the conclusion that all major (sub)groups were represented equally and hence information about them ready at hand.

Yet, when studying the data carefully a curious (by far not new) phenomenon may catch the attention:

National studies (as well as dietary recommendations) sum up the age group of „60+“ or best „65 and over“ in one age category, enclosing individuals on one single characteristic: of „being over age 60“. Thus a „homogeneity“ is pretended despite the fact that individuals' ages range from 60 years to over 100 years. This is neither scientific sound (representative) nor does it consider the heterogeneity of that age group.

When studying factors assumed to influence or determine food habits it might be helpful to look at individuals who have many years of experience with and exposure to food: the elderly. For several reasons focusing on the food habits of the elderly is a unique opportunity and might offer insights to determinants of food habits, food patterns, food customs and food beliefs:

- Europe and especially Germany is „greying“.

At present more than 15% of the total German population are over the age of 65 years.

Demographers encounter a major shift in age structure, it is likely that by the year 2030 almost every third German will be over 65 years.

This change of population structure is unprecedented in history. We do not know how this change will influence the overall nutrition situation, food trends, food consumption patterns, food industry and trade.

- In 1994 103 Bill DM of costs was caused by nutritional diseases in Germany. A major proportion of costs was contributed by the age group over 65 years.

Nutrition is seen as an important factor contributing to health and well being in later life.

Yet today we still have little knowledge on both: the actual nutritional need and nutritional status of elderly and actual food patterns and food habits of this age group.

- Food habits are seen as some of the most persisting traits in human behavior. Studying individuals with life long exposure to factors contributing to food habits will be helpful in directing our research to what actually shapes, determines, influences food habits.
- A retrospective look could be helpful to identify individuals who can be seen as „successfully aging“ (well being, good mental health, self reported subjective well feeling and health, capable to live independently) and to draw the respective conclusions for nutrition education.
- Once we know more about factors determining food habits we could direct nutrition counselling and nutrition education towards healthy and wholesome food habits which were found to promote health and wellness in later life.

For indepth research in this age group it is suggested to include qualitative methods:

- biographical interviews have proved to be a valuable means of studying elderly women age 65 to 94 years (to get insight in the actual life world, cultural aspects of food, getting to know the ideas of food patterns from the elderly, build up trust which is necessary for information; food is regarded as a pleasant topic which is easily accepted and „non-threatening“).

- personal food records including time and location of consumed meals are valid methods with individuals who still have the ability to write and fill out questionnaires (which are supposedly „successfully agers“, thus the group of interest).
- participant observation of homes, settings of meal preparation, meal consumptions, shopping opportunities gives insight on food habits and is an important source of information (and mostly willingly given since elderly women take pride in still being able to cook and be regarded as „expert“ in doing so).

It seems to me from my research on food habits on elderly women that a close look on early „eating education“ and biography can be helpful means and offer intriguing insight to the understanding of factors shaping food habits, food beliefs and food patterns.