DOWN WITH THE SLUM

Many know Jaap Seidell as the country’s foremost obesity specialist. But that’s only part of the story. ‘For me it’s all about the emancipation of vulnerable groups.’ He intends to use his recent appointment as a University Professor to achieve that goal.

By Rianne Lindhout

Unfortunately but true, walk just a kilometre from the posh environs of the Amsterdam Zuid district and you’ll find yourself in a neighbourhood where people’s health deteriorates fifteen years earlier than where your stroll began. In the Nieuw-West district people look less healthy and they are heavier.

Health scientist Jaap Seidell wants to do something about this huge, unjustifiable difference. ‘Obesity means more than just an increased risk of cardiovascular problems. It is a symptom that indicates something is not right in society. It’s an easily measured symptom, too, because it jumps right out at you.’

‘Obesity is a symptom that indicates something is not right in society’

After 35 years of research into overweight and its more severe manifestation, obesity, the nutrition expert and epidemiologist is convinced that conditions can be created that allow people to grow up healthy and to complete an education that allows them to get ahead in life. ‘It seems to me that the enormous difference in healthy life expectancy will then largely dissipate. We can then improve educational performance and health, thereby largely eliminating the inequity in those areas.’

He is very keen to try to make it work in a deprived area in a major city. The expertise is available, and funding has now also been made available. ‘With obesity we talk about two feet firmly on the ground, both psychologically and economically. ‘And it has to happen sustainably, because everything is connected to everything else. If we can’t make this happen in the Netherlands, then it can’t be done anywhere. And if we can do it here, then it can also be done in the slums of Delhi.’

Just as Seidell was ready to launch this mega-experiment, he received the appointment from VU University Amsterdam that will empower him to forge ahead: as of 2013 he is a University Professor. ‘This means he now has more time to establish the necessary connections. Many know Seidell as an expert in the field of obesity. And indeed, he knows quite a bit about nutrition and health. Journalists interview him frequently when writing articles about weight loss. Seidell always seizes the opportunity to refute the persistent notion that being overweight is simply the individual’s own fault. He not only targets journalists, but also policy makers. ‘My message involves citizens, business and government,’ he explains. He takes a sheet of paper and draws a simple linear graph showing a stick figure rolling a stone uphill. ‘Leading a healthy lifestyle is an individual responsibility’, says Seidell, ‘but government and industry must create the right conditions to ensure that it is not too difficult to do so.’ Seidell is referring, for example, to clean, safe streets where you can ride your bike and play, but also to health education in schools and to businesses that produce and sell healthier products. ‘All of these factors determine the slope of the graph: the effort it takes to roll the stone uphill.’

**SKINNY PSYCHOLOGIST**

Seidell became fascinated by the subject of overweight in 1981. He was a student of human nutrition at the time, and he attended a meeting of extremely obese people led by a doctor and psychologist. It was clear to him that the well-meaning advice offered by the two lean healthcare professionals was utterly inadequate, and he realized that they could recommend nothing that would truly help these people. He describes this experience in his book Tegenwicht - listen en kansen over gewicht (Counterweight - facts and myths about overweight) that he co-authored with Jutka Halberstadt. In the book, he also describes losing 15 percent of his body weight, just to experience how it feels.

**“A terrible period that I do not remember fondly,” he writes. In the decades that followed, he worked as a post-doctoral researcher in Sweden, as a researcher with the Royal Netherlands Academy of Science and as the head of epidemiology of chronic diseases at the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM). First he described the epidemic of lifestyle diseases, then he studied their causes and finally he started focusing on solutions to turn the tide of the ever rising percentage of people who are overweight and who suffer from weight-related disorders. In 1999 the University asked him to design a degree programme in health science, just as he was looking for a new challenge. He found it easy to make the switch from his position at RIVM, where he ran a department of 70, to a small group consisting of a PhD student and a post-doctoral researcher. ‘I’m not at all interested in prestige. Starting over on the ground floor is perfectly fine with me. I can do it again and again.’**

**SCIENTIFIC ICE**

Together with colleague Karel Kits and staff members from various faculties, he designed the specialization that they all would have taken as students. It is a practical programme, relevant and with a great deal of sound research methodology. The result is striking. Seidell proudly explains: ‘Health science is an elusive field, it encompasses a bit of everything, yet nothing fundamental. We draw the knowledge we need from other fields: economics, psychology, communication science, physiology. That’s the only way I can make it work, because you miss the point. But it is also a precarious undertaking. You must ensure that the information you use is correct. You always risk criticism from experts who accuse you of using outdated knowledge. The scientific ice needs to be thick enough every step of the way.’

‘The VU University campus is a playground for scientists’

VU University Amsterdam, which unites all scientific disciplines on a single campus, provides the perfect setting for health sciences and for Seidell’s research: ‘It’s a verdant playground for scientists. For example, I can simply amble over and ask spatial economist Piet Retveld about the right conditions for getting people to walk, bike or take the bus. Or I can approach media psychologist Elly Kenjir to inquire about the influence of media on human behaviour.’

The fact that health scientists tend to take a broad view of things rather than focus on individual phenomena is especially true of Seidell. ‘Some members of our research group are far more expert than I. Most are more highly specialized in a particular field. I’ve always remained active at the intersection of multiple disciplines.’

**DETERMINED**

Seidell rises before sunrise and takes an early train to the university. He takes advantage of the quiet morning hours to work on his correspondence. He also tweets, because he feels it is important to share insights with people outside science. ‘Journalists and MPs are following my footsteps on Twitter. He then has the bulk of the day ahead of him for appointments with people who want to share ideas, who want to collaborate: students, PhD candidates and sparring partners such as city councillors, people from education, the healthcare industry or people interested in setting up urban agriculture projects. ‘Everyone wants to do something useful, but the question is whether you can show that it is effective. We can help to research the likelihood of success.’

He has set about tackling these challenges and determination. For example, he ‘hagged’ GPs about the lack of treatment guidelines for obesity.

Once he’d managed to convince them of the need for such guidelines, they asked him to write a proposal. He was subsequently put in charge of developing the standard of care for obesitas, which describes healthcare guidelines for obese people. Healthcare professionals and patients develop standards of care together. Seidell relishes playing a key role in a complicated process: he inextricably brings parties together, and he never gets irritated when politicians, businesses or people from healthcare let their own interests interfere. ‘I usually understand where they’re coming from. Fortunately, I am not hindered by any special interests.’

**FROM PON TO JOGG**

More information on Jaap Seidell (including his CV) is available on his website. Below is a selection of the social initiatives in which he plays an important role:

- Partnerschap Overgewicht Nederland (Overweight Partnership Netherlands): Patients and healthcare professionals working together to improve care.
- Gewichtsbegeleiders Zuid (Objective weight鳟建): partnership of 26 parties from government, industry and social organizations committed to fighting obesity. Paul Rosenmöller is the chairman and ambassador of this healthy weight initiative.
- Ik kies bewust (Conscious choice) foundation, known for the symbols on food products that make healthy nutrition easier to maintain.
- VeiligEet (SafeEating) foundation, providing certificates and awards to food products that make healthy nutrition easier to maintain.
- Jongeren Gezond Gewicht (Youth at a healthy weight), an integrated approach by municipalities in which all stakeholders, public and private, work together. It is based on the French ‘Foodie’ network, in which Seidell is also involved.