Creating an Enabling Environment for Health, Independence and Ageing in Dignity

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Traditionally, we mainly focus on the ageing individual and population – much less on environments and even less on the interaction between the person and the environment. Independence in daily functioning and the well-being of older European citizens in the future will be significantly enhanced through an improved understanding of the interrelations between ageing persons and their environments in areas such as home and out-of-home environments, intertwined with the impact of technology and products. In order to ensure full integration and participation of older people in society, the societal infrastructure must be accessible and enable activity and participation in areas such as housing, public facilities and public transportation. Based on current research on person-environment interactions, there is evidence that combinations of functional limitations as related to the environmental barriers present are the major contributors to the generation of accessibility problems. Actors in physical planning need more knowledge on functional capacity and how the process of ageing interacts with physical environmental barriers in the generation of accessibility problems.

The home is the major place for ageing and thereby also an important arena for the provision of social services and health care. While objective aspects of housing such as housing standard and accessibility are important, based on current research on home and health we know that perceived aspects of housing are crucial for activity, participation and health. There is a complex interplay between objective and perceived aspects of housing and health, with marked differences among sub-groups of older people. While our knowledge on such dynamics is insufficient, there is a need for more individualized housing counseling and housing provision. With this follows needs for the development of evidence-based social services and health care that can be provided in different forms of housing, carefully adapted to the individual situation.

Against the strong research evidence of the positive effects of physical and mental activity to support active and healthy ageing, there is an urge for foresighted health promotion and preventive strategies, going beyond those of housing and care provision. Most important, mobility is often compromised by functional decline. Assistive technology that supports mobility and physical activity has seen much development, but in several European countries there is low awareness of what the use of mobility devices would add to quality of life and well-being, and the provision systems are not well developed.

Adding to the complexity of the process of ageing, with current medical advances larger proportions of the population will live for many years with chronic diseases and disabilities, coming with even larger challenges for society to create environments enabling activity, participation, independence, and ultimately - health.