

# EurSafe News

European Society for Agricultural and Food Ethics



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## **Feature**

### **Pharma-food:**

## **Are tailor-made, individual diets relevant for problems of public health?**

A Dutch insurance company aspires to improve public health by refunding customers who buy pharma food products from Unilever. Cooperation between bio-science and industry is likely to result in a host of new pharma food products. There will be a market for such products; but specialists in public health doubt that there will be much overall effect.

*by Gitte Meyer*

IVGZ, a large insurance company in the Netherlands, has signed an agreement of cooperation with Unilever and has assigned a role to itself as a promotor of public health. For three years VGZ will refund its customers part of their expenses – up to 40 Euros a year – when they buy Unilever's Becel pro-active products. The products – margarine, milk and yoghurt – are expected to prevent heart disease by way of reducing the amount of cholesterol in the blood stream.

The products contain concentrated phytosterols; that is, substances from plant membranes that have been shown to be able to bar those other sterols, cholesterol, from

settling down. Oil from plants contain just a small amount of phytosterols. Thus, it takes 2.500 liters of vegetable oil to produce one kilo of phytosterols. One kilo is almost equivalent to the currently recommended intake of phytosterols for one person in a year, in order to reduce a high level of cholesterol. The products facilitate an intake at this level.

The insurance company expects such concentrated effort to reduce the level of cholesterol in its 1,2 million customers – it assumes that one third of them actually have a cholesterol problem – to result in decreasing expenses to cholesterol lowering pharmaceuticals and to other kinds of medical treatment of heart disease, including coronary surgery. In 2003 VGZ used 92 million Euros for these purposes. Two other, minor Dutch insurance companies – IZA and IZZ – have chosen a similiar approach.

On its website VGZ announces that it wants to take on a role as a promotor of more healthy and more conscious habits of eating, because healthier lifestyles will save a lot of money. It also describes the new initiative as, at the same time, a logical and a unique step for an insurance company to take. Logical because it wants to save money, and because there is scientific evidence as regards the ability of phytosterols to compete succesfully with cholesterol. Unique because normally insurance companies do not busy themselves with disease prevention.

As a rule, public health issues have – in Europe, at least – been dealt with by public institutions rather than by private companies. The VGZ-Unilever cooperation may be seen as an instance of a trend that turns these issues into commercial issues on a new scale. Food producers market disease prevention as consumer goods, offsprings of a marriage between modern bio-science and industry. Insurance companies take on a role as promotors of public health. Is public health going private? To which extent is the rationale of commercial enterprise compatible with the public health rationale that has been developed within academia in close contact with public institutions?

### **7,5 litres of vegetable oil a day**

The Becel pro-activ products – as well as many other products that are now having phytosterols added to them – are based on a logic of purification and concentration. The

focus of the products is a narrow one. It is aimed at the elimination of one single risk factor, and one specific remedy is used to achieve this elimination. Rather than having to consume 7,5 litres of vegetable oil per day, in order to get the three grams of phytosterols currently recommended as a means of lowering a high level of cholesterol, consumers are offered products that contain a high concentration of these substances.

On the other hand, there is also a logic of broad dissemination. The risk factor in focus is supposed to be of relevance to one third of the Dutch population. The products, however, are offered to all consumers, and all VGZ customers are offered the refund. If consumers want to know whether they might have a reason to use the products they must undergo testing. In the official information about the initiative, though, expected beneficial effects – rather than the aspect of testing – are prominent.

The approach of isolating single factors in order to evaluate their health effects is also prominent in public health research. When it comes to practical advice about action, however, specialists in this field tend to deviate from this scheme. They do indeed focus on single factors and on broad dissemination. Probably, few others than newborn babies have not been informed over and over again about the risks related to smoking, fatty foods and lack of physical activity. But public health specialists are into disseminating advice, rather than products. And the emphasis on single risk factors is combined with an emphasis on health as multi-faceted and as a matter of balancing a variety of different considerations at the same time.

### **Between market and public institutions**

In January at Utrecht University, at an international seminar on food, prevention and ethics, these differences were made clear. Pieter van't Veer, for instance, who is a professor at the Division of Nutrition at Wageningen University, stressed that from a public health perspective on food, dietary patterns are important, rather than particular foods for particular groups. From his point of view public health issues are issues for society, and how to approach them is "a challenge for society, not just the individual".

Also Daan Kromhout from the Dutch National Institute for Public Health and the Environment was keen to emphasize the

relationship between eating and being healthy as "always a question of balance, rather than about one single factor or another". According to him mass diseases, like cancer and heart disease, can be prevented by a healthy diet and lifestyle. Thus the task is one of persuading the population to follow general – and well-known – advice on diet and lifestyle.

Thus, attempts to improve public health via the marketplace shares a focus on risk with public health institutions, but the two approaches part company in relation to practice. They disagree on the question of whether to target specific, isolated mechanisms in the human body by way of products, that may be bought by rather large groups of consumers, or to concentrate on general patterns and advice, stressing the interplay of many mechanisms in context.

Another difference relates to the issue of testing. Consumer goods that are aimed at reducing one single risk factor are – in principle, at least – linked to testing. Persons who do not qualify as members of a specific risk group have no reason to buy a product which is aimed at reducing that specific risk factor. Testing is part of the rationale although actual marketing may inspire another impression. To follow general advice on diet and lifestyle, on the other hand, one does not need any testing; and the issue of health screenings – testing of large groups or whole populations – remains a controversial issue in public health discussions.

These two questions – whether to target specific, isolated mechanisms in the human body, and whether to increase the use of health testing – appear to be issues for discussion not only in relation to current marketing of 'preventive goods', but also in relation to future development of pharma foods. Some of these are likely to arise from the current buzzing around the term of nutrigenomics; that is, the idea of using genetic knowledge in order to understand and affect relations between food and diseases.

### **Nutrigenomics**

At present, prospects of nutrigenomics are being looked into in a research project about food, prevention and ethics at the Ethics Institute at Utrecht University. It is not clear what advice or products – if any – nutrigenomics may result in, but it is important, argues Franck Meijboom from the

institute, to accompany scientific research from the very early stage with ethical reflection and discussion. Says Franck Meijboom: "We need an ethics of development, not only the ethics of application."

One of the questions looked into during the project relates to the possible development of genetically tailor-made diets. Public health specialists invited to discuss the question at the international seminar in Utrecht in January were, however, rather sceptical of the prospects of such diets. Daan Kromhout argued that "personal diets have no added value in the prevention of mass diseases". Pieter van't Veer argued that the connections between diets and genetics may be too complex to be understood at all, and at least it is "much too early to incorporate genetics in advice". He expected that a few genes would be shown to be very important for dietary advice in relation to very small, specific groups of people. As a rule, however, he found that dietary advice and genomics should be regarded as "two completely different issues".

From a present public health perspective, then, advice based on nutrigenomics does not seem to have much of a future. From a market perspective it may be different. Nutrigenomics may result in the development of products, although for the sake of volume they are likely to be ready-made for segments of consumers rather than tailor-made for individual persons. Tom MacMillan from the independent British Food Ethics Council summed up the discussions at the seminar by stating that there seems to be much scepticism as regards the value of nutrigenomics in relation to public health. At the same time, it seems to be a widespread expectation that, nevertheless, research and development within the field of nutrigenomics will lead to the development and marketing of new pharma food products in the years to come.

At present, however, nutrigenomics is still a theoretical concept. Phytosterols are actually on the market. Currently they are, according to the Danish Institute for Food and Veterinary Research, being added to a whole range of products, including salad dressing and chili sauce.

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## Feature:

### ‘Codes of conduct are very boring’

#### **Debate on ethics at Dies Natalis of Wageningen University, 9 March 2005:**

A code of conduct for scientific research is perhaps necessary, but according to the emeritus professor of Medical Genetics at Rotterdam, Professor Hans Galjaard, it is above all likely to be ‘very boring’. If I were to read all the rules I wouldn’t have any time left for research. At least then there would be no danger that I would do the wrong research.’

Galjaard was one of the concluding speakers in the debate on ethics held on the morning prior to the celebration of the Wageningen Dies Natalis (foundation day). His speech added a lighter note to what had been a fairly serious debate. As he put it, ethics comes closest to a ‘gut feeling’ that can help you when you have to make choices.

His opponent in the debate, distinguished professor and FAO vice-president Louise Fresco (‘I’ve been hired to disagree with you’) saw a bigger role for ethics. ‘Ethics is always about dilemmas, about making choices and about who should make the decision. Basic science should be driven by science, but society should also have a say in the matter,

and the line of research should never be dictated by interest groups.’

According to former World Bank top man Professor Ismail Serageldin, also distinguished professor in Wageningen and director of the Library of Alexandria, ethics in science can be reduced to a simple assumption. ‘A scientist is also a citizen and he doesn’t leave his citizenship behind at the door of his laboratory.’

Serageldin illustrated ethical dilemmas with a story in which someone is asked to give a flute to one of three children, but where only information about one of the children is known. ‘If you hear that one child is poor and the rest already have everything, you are likely to give the flute to the poor child. But if you hear that the second child is musical, you will probably choose that child. If, however, you hear that the third child made the flute himself, you will be inclined to give him the flute. It is about the trade-off between equality, utility and property. It gets really difficult when you have heard all three stories.’

The most outspoken contribution to the plenary discussion came from the students in the audience who want more training in ethics. ‘All teachers should include more ethics in their lectures,’ claimed student Babs Jaspers. ‘I get worried when scientists do not think about the consequences of what they are doing.’

*GvM – Whispr/Cereales*

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## Conferences & Courses

### 2005

May 12–13

#### **Conflicts of Interest in Human Research (Canberra – Australia)**

Second conference on ethics in human research, organised by the Australian Health Ethics Committee (AHEC) and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC)

[www.communicationlink.com.au/ethics/main.aspx](http://www.communicationlink.com.au/ethics/main.aspx)

May 19-21

#### **Animals in History: Studying the Not So Human Past (Cologne – Germany)**

Sessions on: Understanding Human-Animal Relations; Perceiving Animals; Moral Concerns and the Non-Human; Animals in Politics; Scientific Discourses; Exhibiting the Wild; Pets and Public Culture; Gendering the Beast; Imperial Animals; Hunting; Animal Urbanity; and Consumer Culture Goes Animal.

Sponsored by the German Historical Institute, Washington, DC and University of Cologne

[www.ghi-dc.org/conferences/animalsinhistory\\_cfp.html](http://www.ghi-dc.org/conferences/animalsinhistory_cfp.html)

May 27

**Gene Patents and Public Health (Leuven - Belgium)**

Recent events have clearly demonstrated that the public is very sensitive to the use of patents in the field of genetics. Discussions arise in particular with regard to the patentability of diagnostic and therapeutic applications based on genes. Concerns are expressed with regard to the possible blocking effects of such patents on access to health care. The conference offers a survey of the varied and complex issues which occur in patenting diagnostic methods. The conference also provides empirical evidence on well established strategies for using patents and explores new measures for gaining access to patents.

Organised by the Centre for Intellectual Property Rights, Catholic University Leuven  
e-mail: [linda.mees@law.kuleuven.ac.be](mailto:linda.mees@law.kuleuven.ac.be)  
<http://www.law.kuleuven.ac.be/cir>

Jun 2

**Food, Ethics and the Public's Health (Keele University - UK)**

Adam Golberg: [a.w.golberg@peak.keele.ac.uk](mailto:a.w.golberg@peak.keele.ac.uk)  
[www.keele.ac.uk/depts/ep/peak/webdocuments/foodethics.pdf](http://www.keele.ac.uk/depts/ep/peak/webdocuments/foodethics.pdf)

Jun 5 – 8

**56th Annual Meeting of the European Association for Animal Production (EAAP) (Uppsala, Sweden)**

e-mail: [EAAP2005@slu.se](mailto:EAAP2005@slu.se)  
[www.conference.slu.se/EAAP2005/](http://www.conference.slu.se/EAAP2005/)

Jun 9-12

**Visualizing Food and Farm (Portland, Oregon - USA)**

Joint annual meeting of the Agriculture, Food and Human Values Society (AFHVS) and the Association for the Study of Food and Society (ASFS)  
[www.clas.ufl.edu/users/rhaynes/afhvs/NextMeeting.htm](http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/rhaynes/afhvs/NextMeeting.htm)

Jun 14-15

**1<sup>st</sup> Annual Obesity Europe Conference (Brussels - Belgium)**

[www.obesityeurope.com](http://www.obesityeurope.com)

Jun 15-18

**Food Safety and Quality Through the Food Chain: Farm to Fork (Istanbul – Turkey)**

1<sup>st</sup> International Food and Nutrition congress  
[www.tubitakcongress2005.org](http://www.tubitakcongress2005.org)

Jul 6-10

**9<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Agricultural Biotechnology: Ten Years After (Ravello – Italy)**

Organisers: International Consortium on Agricultural Biotechnology Research (ICABR), Catholic University of Leuven etc  
[www.economia.uniroma2.it/conferenze/icabr2005/](http://www.economia.uniroma2.it/conferenze/icabr2005/)

Jul 11-12

**Exploring Human-Animal Relationships (Niagara Falls, NY – USA)**

14th Annual International Society for Anthrozoology conference

[www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/CCAB/ISAZ.htm](http://www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/CCAB/ISAZ.htm)

Jul 13-15

**Third International Symposium on the Genetics of Animal Health (Iowa - USA)**

e-mail: [ashuey@iastate.edu](mailto:ashuey@iastate.edu)  
[www.ans.iastate.edu/bis/events/gah/GAH2005.html](http://www.ans.iastate.edu/bis/events/gah/GAH2005.html)

Aug 5-9

**Aquaculture Europe 2005. Lessons from the Past to Optimise the Future (Trondheim – Norway)**

[www.easonline.org/agenda/en/description.asp?id=216](http://www.easonline.org/agenda/en/description.asp?id=216)

Aug 20-24

**39<sup>th</sup> International Congress of International Society for Applied Ethology (ISAE) (Sagamihara- Japan)**

[www.applied-ethology.org/isaemeetings.htm](http://www.applied-ethology.org/isaemeetings.htm)

Aug 23-25

**COHAB 2005 – Conference on Health and Biodiversity (Galway – Ireland)**

First International Conference on the Importance of Biodiversity to Human Health

e-mail: [info@cohab2005.com](mailto:info@cohab2005.com)  
[www.cohab2005.com](http://www.cohab2005.com)

Aug 21-25

**Bringing Genomes to Life. ECB12: 12th European Congress on Biotechnology (Copenhagen -Denmark)**

Organisers: Danish Biotechnology Forum and the Danish Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology on behalf of the European Federation of Biotechnology

Lars Haastrup Pedersen: [lh@bio.auc.dk](mailto:lh@bio.auc.dk)  
[www.ecb12.dk/](http://www.ecb12.dk/)

Aug 21-25

**5th World Congress on Alternatives & Animal Use in the Life Sciences (Berlin – Germany)**

[www.ctw-congress.de/act2005](http://www.ctw-congress.de/act2005)

Sep 19-21

**Shaping Sustainable Systems (Adelaide - Australia)**

15<sup>th</sup> IFOAM Organic World Congress  
[www.nasaa.com.au/ifoam/](http://www.nasaa.com.au/ifoam/)

Sep 21-23

**Researching Sustainable Systems: International Scientific Conference on Organic Agriculture (Adelaide- Australia)**

Organiser: ISOFAR – International Society of Organic Agriculture Research  
[www.isofar.org/adelaide2005/index.html](http://www.isofar.org/adelaide2005/index.html)

Sep 25-28

**Application of New Genetic Technologies to Animal Breeding (Queensland – Australia)**

Dr Heather Burrow: [Heather.Burrow@csiro.au](mailto:Heather.Burrow@csiro.au)  
[www.aaabg.org/](http://www.aaabg.org/)

Sep 29-30

**The Future of Rural Development - Making It Simpler, More Coherent and Effective (Maastricht - The Netherlands)**

Organised by The European Institute of Public Administration (EIPA)

e-mail: [w.curfs@eipa-nl.com](mailto:w.curfs@eipa-nl.com)

Oct 28-29

**Science and Security (Heidelberg - Germany)**

The contributions of science to security, and the security of science itself have rarely, if ever, been more topical than they are now. How can we minimise the possibility of the misuse of biological information? Is the freedom of research reconcilable with increased demands for global security? What is the state of the art in biometrics and the technology of identification of people? How is biological information collected, stored, exchanged and used for the purposes of security? What is the societal impact of and response to such developments and issues?

Organised by the European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO) and the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL)

<http://www.embo.org/projects/scisoc/scisoc2005.html>

Nov 4-5

**Labeling Genetically Modified Food (Columbia, Missouri - USA)**

An Interdisciplinary Conference at the University of Missouri-Columbia, Philosophy Department.

**Call for papers:**

Deadline 30 May 2005

Call info:

[http://www.missouri.edu/~weirichp/food\\_conference/documents/Call\\_for\\_papers.htm](http://www.missouri.edu/~weirichp/food_conference/documents/Call_for_papers.htm)

Conference info:

[http://www.missouri.edu/~weirichp/food\\_conference/food\\_conference.htm](http://www.missouri.edu/~weirichp/food_conference/food_conference.htm)

Nov 27-Dec 2

**Biotechnology Havana 2005: For a Sustainable Food Production (Havana - Cuba)**

Dr. Mario Pablo Estrada García:

[BH2005@ciqb.edu.cu](mailto:BH2005@ciqb.edu.cu)

<http://bh2005.ciqb.edu.cu/>

Nov 14-15

**Communicating European Research 2005 International Conference (Brussels - Belgium)**

The event will focus on the manifold aspects of science communication and will also take stock of the way towards the Seventh Framework Programme

Programme

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/research/conferences/2005/cer2005/index\\_en.html](http://europa.eu.int/comm/research/conferences/2005/cer2005/index_en.html)

## 2006

May 30-31

**Joint Organic Congress 2006 (Odense, Denmark)**

Conference will examine what research in organic food and farming can offer in regard to the development of agriculture and food production, rural development and environmental protection in Europe.

Claus Bo Andreasen: [Clausbo.Andreasen@agrsci.dk](mailto:Clausbo.Andreasen@agrsci.dk)  
[www.organic-congress.org](http://www.organic-congress.org)

Aug 6 - 10

**11th International Congress of Human Genetics (Brisbane - Australia)**

John C MacMillan: [ichg2006@icms.com.au](mailto:ichg2006@icms.com.au)

[www.ichg2006.com/index.cfm?MenuID=0](http://www.ichg2006.com/index.cfm?MenuID=0)

**Remember to plot in  
the 6th EurSafe  
Congress  
which will be  
organised in Oslo,  
Norway  
21-24 June 2006**

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## Books

### Earlier published books

**The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfecting of Our Nature**

by Leon Kass, University of Chicago Press, second ed. (May 1999) ISBN: 0226425681

**Food, Inc.: Mendel to Monsanto -The Promises and Perils of the Biotech Harvest**

by Peter Pringle, Simon & Schuster (June 10, 2003) ISBN: 0743226119

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# Journal

## New journal

### Genomics, Society and Policy

Genomics, Society and Policy is an initiative of the ESRC Centre for Economic and Social Aspects of Genomics (CESAGen), the ESRC Genomics Network and the Dutch Centre for Society and Genomics. As a peer reviewed online journal, GSP provides an outlet for interdisciplinary research on the social, ethical and legal aspects of genomics and related emergent technologies such as nanotechnology and stem cell research. The first issue of this new journal was launched on 28th February 2005.

[www.gspjournal.com](http://www.gspjournal.com)

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# Website

<http://www.visiblefood.org/>

Visible Food is a semi-open website/database that allows users to search for food production information by product name, brand, parent-corporation, ingredients, toxins and 'invisibles'. This project, currently in betaphase, allows users to retrieve or themselves load vital information on the 'invisibles' which impact health, labor and global trade, society and the natural environment.

<http://www.transmediale.de/page/detail/detail.0.projects.214.2.html>

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# Membership information

Until recently EurSafe membership and financial administration was run by the Eursafe executive secretariat. From December 2004, however, De Beek Group in The Hague, an office specialized in carrying out organization and business administration has taken over the tasks of both membership and financial administration of EurSafe. All membership affairs, including subscriptions, renewals and handling fees are taken care of by De Beek Group. It also takes care of the Eur-Safe members' subscriptions to JAEE (Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics) and the members' need of information, addresses, etc. The contact address is:

**Eursafe Membership Administration**  
**Parkweg 27**  
**NL-2585 JH Den Haag, The Netherlands**  
**Tel +31 (0) 70 34 56 456**  
**Fax +31 (0) 70 34 57 146**  
**E-mail: [info@eursafe ledenadmin.nl](mailto:info@eursafe ledenadmin.nl)**

Membership fees shall now be paid directly to the EurSafe Membership Administration. It will no longer be connected with the EurSafe Congress fees.

## EurSafe information

### Executive Secretariat

From 1 March 2005 the executive secretariat of EurSafe will be provided by **Paul den Besten**, who also is director of the Royal Netherlands Society of Agricultural Sciences. Paul can be reached by e-mail at: [paul.denbesten@wur.nl](mailto:paul.denbesten@wur.nl)  
Classic mail to Eursafe can be sent to the adress:  
Eursafe secretariat  
P.o.box 79  
6700 AB Wageningen, The Netherlands

### Executive Committee

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### Website

[www.eursafe.org](http://www.eursafe.org)

## EurSafe News

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**Deadline for the next issue: 1 June 2005**