

INVENTING THE SCIENCE OF NUTRITION:

A HEALTHY DIET IN THE 19TH CENTURY

Dr Annemarie de Knecht-Van Eekelen, Netherlands.

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Way into the nineteenth century people's ideas about health and disease were based on the classical Hippocratic tradition. Accordingly, the balance between the four humours – blood, black bile, yellow bile and phlegm – should be maintained and the diet had an important role in sustaining this balance. All nourishment had their own characteristics, based on which they were used in treating a disorder.

The increasing knowledge of anatomy and physiology changed the views of medical doctors on the structure and function of the human body, but for a long time this understanding had little effect on the treatment of patients, let alone on the regimen of health and dietary advices.

The changing views on food in the nineteenth century are primarily based on the developments in the natural sciences. Food was no longer some nourishment, but became an arrangement of carbohydrate, fat and protein. This raised important questions about quantities and ratio's, about digestion and metabolism, which became major subjects of research. Knowledge about minerals and vitamins was still lacking, as was the understanding of proteins as polypeptides.

Innovative technologies for the processing of food and food preservation, also thanks to the rise of bacteriology, created a new industry that could market its products to a growing city population of middle and higher incomes. Their advertising clashed with the advice of nutritionist, who dwelled on "a variety of food and nothing in excess" derived from the Corpus Hippocraticum.

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