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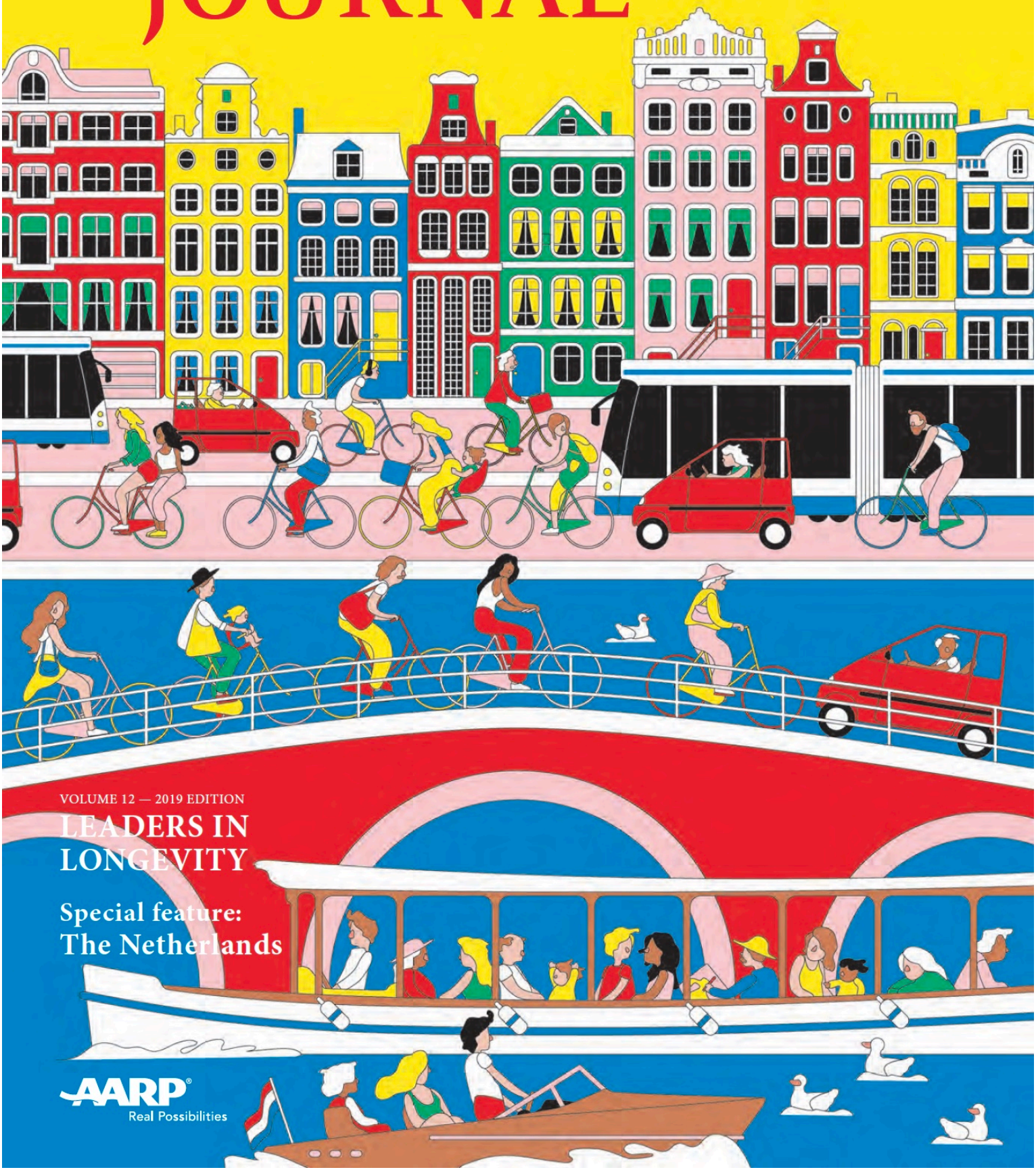


VOLUME 12 — 2019 EDITION

LEADERS IN LONGEVITY

Special feature: The Netherlands

AARP
Real Possibilities

LEFT Residents stroll through the open gardens. TOP Henk Smit gives a tour of the grounds. ABOVE The facility owns four duofiets, twin bikes with electric pedal assistance, that both staff and residents can use.

chickens in a coop, raised vegetable garden beds, and a greenhouse with an abundance of plants and flowers. Activities like communal meals, movie nights, art classes, and happy hours also help to create a sense of community and normalcy. Adding to the familial atmosphere, the 45 staff members undertake any number of tasks, from cooking meals to doing laundry to caring for the residents — all of which, says Smit, encourages more interaction. In addition to the 27 residents, a dozen seniors with dementia also come to Reigershoeve for daytime care.

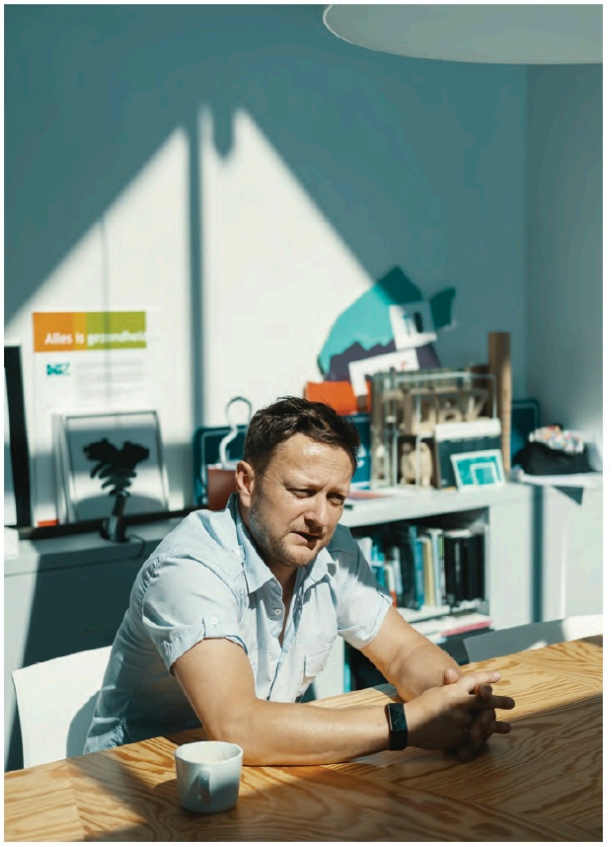
In typical Dutch fashion, Smit is quite direct about the challenges he encountered to fulfill his vision for Reigershoeve. From fighting initial protests of concerned neighbors, to convincing government inspectors to allow knives in the kitchens. He wanted to keep the knives as another aspect of home and normalcy that the residents crave. Smit encourages, as much as possible, independence. The facility has no gates or continuous monitoring. "We say well, when you're at home, you can also walk around. Maybe it's a risk, but we say, no risk, no life."

Science and Innovation

Although just a few hours by car from the cosmopolitan sprawl of Amsterdam, the northern part of the Netherlands feels vastly different, with long stretches of countryside extending as far as the eye can see. It seems an unlikely place for a hub of scientific research on aging, but here, in the northern city of Groningen, one of the largest multi-generational cohort studies of its kind is taking place. The goal for the three-decade study, called Lifelines, is to provide insights into how to grow older in a healthier way.

LEFT The landscape along the A7 highway to Groningen.

RIGHT Richard Zwarts, a Lifelines participant and advisory board member, in his office.



Richard Zwarts, a native of the area, is a Lifelines participant and member of the advisory board. He signed up in 2006, when the study was launched, after seeing a newspaper ad. At the time, he was only in his early 30s but was intrigued by the concept. "I am a guy who wants to share," he says. "So, I think the idea is quite novel because when we share a lot, then we can learn, and other people can gain by that." Every five years, he stops by for a checkup, various measurements, and tests of blood and urine.

This scientific approach to the aging challenge speaks to the Dutch embrace of research and innovation. The Netherlands competes in a class far beyond its size in terms of research productivity and scientific impact, with a robust system of world-class universities and research institutions. From 1996 to 2015, twice as many scientific articles were published per capita from the Netherlands as the OECD average.

The Lifelines study, with 167,000 participants across three generations, is ambitious even by Dutch standards. It is one of the largest biobanks in the world, with a -80C storage facility, LifeStore, that bills itself as the coldest place in all of Europe. The data from the study has been used in 250 scientific publications, with several promising discoveries on the horizon. Bart Scheerder, of the Biobank Knowledge and Expertise center (BiKE) at the University Medical Center Groningen, a partner of the study, gives one example: "We have a large number of pre-diabetics in the cohort and we expect that in the future, major impact should be created on early detection and treatment of diabetes, using Lifelines data and samples."

A globally-ranked university, the highest aging population in the country, and pockets of poverty and economic depression make the northern provinces ripe for such an endeavor. In addition, the Netherlands itself is an incubator for innovation, from strong government collaboration, to high education levels, to a cultural willingness to come together. The country now ranks as number two on the Global Innovation Index. "In the Netherlands, we discuss everything," says Scheerder, who refers to that topic of polderen that keeps cropping up. "The nice thing is, we are also able to come to a shared decision. We bring all stakeholders together and come to a consensus."

Nowhere is this consensus building more apparent than in another Groningen-based organization, HANNN, which stands for the Healthy Ageing Network of Northern Netherlands. Though Lifelines has become the flagship scientific aging initiative of the northern provinces, HANNN is doing something equally as innovative on a broader level, with goals that are bold and far-reaching.

HANNN is a coalition of sorts, bringing together key thinkers and decision makers in different sectors to create an ecosystem for healthy aging. In short, the group wants to engineer the ideal environment to grow old — from food and exercise, to healthcare, to housing and city planning. Their programs run the gamut: working with fast food restaurants to introduce healthier menu options, with developers and architects to design age-friendly structures and parks, with schools and businesses to organize exercise programs.

The massive undertaking involves not only changing policies but changing mindsets. Daan Bultje, the director of HANNN, describes how he decided to chase such an ambitious goal, rather than attempting smaller, more incremental steps. "We have generations of people in certain areas of our region that grow up in poverty, but also in poor health," he says. "Instead of saying well, let's try to change a little bit about this, or a little bit about that, we need more fundamental change in how we approach health. That can't be done by small steps. That must be done by big steps."

Luckily, in the Netherlands, big steps seem more possible. With minimal rules and legislation and an openness to new methods and approaches, it stands to reason that the Dutch would lend their critical thinking to aging.

"We as a society need to change things, and not only in healthcare but also in prevention, making sure that we grow old as healthy as possible," says Bultje. Both HANNN and the Lifelines study are at ground zero of efforts to conquer the changing demographics of their region.

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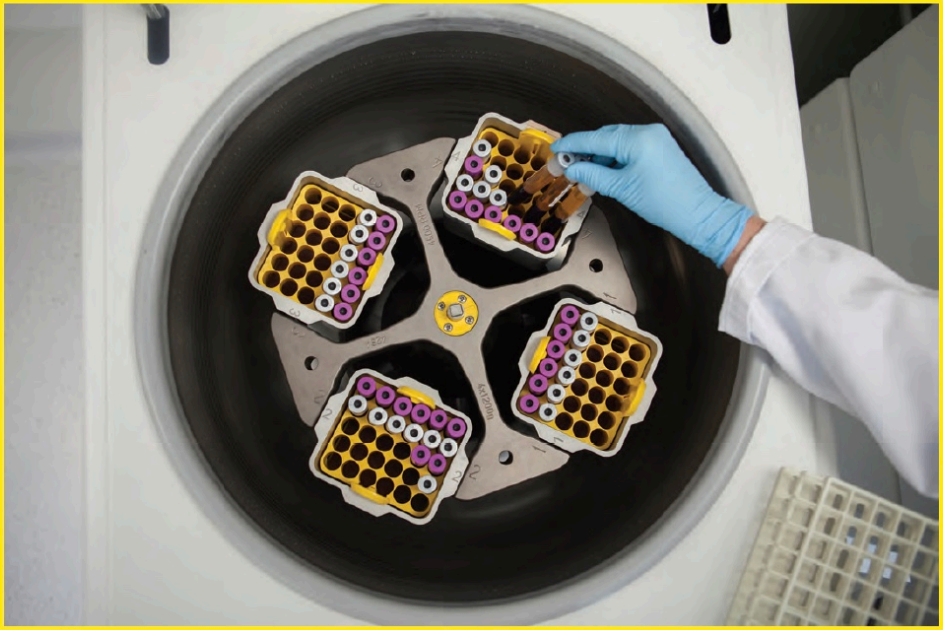
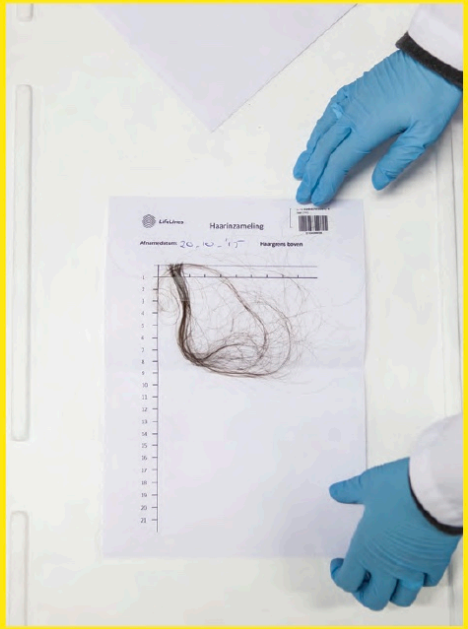
The Lifelines Project, Groningen

Photos by Marieke Kijk in de Vegte for Lifelines

Every five years, measurements and samples are collected from participants in the Lifelines study. Part of the samples are used for direct biomarker analysis and the rest are catalogued and stored at -80C in the LifeStore, a large freezer facility. The aim of the biobank is to have data and samples ready for scientists from all over the world to use for research into healthy aging.





Healthy Ageing Network Northern Netherlands

Photos courtesy of HANNN

The vision of HANNN is to remake the entire ecosystem of the Northern Netherlands, making it more conducive to aging well and helping to add healthy years to people's lives. Through their many initiatives, the organization brings key players together to influence a variety of domains, such as food, housing, infrastructure, exercise, and healthcare organization.