

Care for Chinese elderly

1. Introduction

The Chinese who live in The Netherlands have, over a number of years, become more and more “visible”. They used to be a group of people who have always taken care of themselves. Sickness and care were issues that were dealt with within the family, the elderly lived with their children who were expected to care for them until they died, without any outside help. This way of taking care of each other is not strange, in fact, most other cultures go about it in the exact same way. However, over the last few decades, several forms of professional support and care have been developed in The Netherlands, in order to allow the elderly to remain independent for longer, not having to rely on their family. This goal can be achieved by providing certain healthcare facilities as well as facilities at home. These developments have been triggered by changes in society. Many women go out to work these days, and it no longer goes without saying that children and grandchildren live nearby. Besides the fact that the average life-expectancy has risen remarkably, the possibility to be cared for within the family is complicated by the fact that the housing built after the Second World War is unsuitable for more than just one generation.

The facilities that are available have not been used much by the Chinese people living in Holland. One of the main reasons for this may be that the information about these facilities is too inaccessible, because of a language barrier.

2. Historical and Present Situation

The Chinese people in The Netherlands originate from several different places and speak the various Chinese languages.

- China –from all over China
- Surinam, a former Dutch colony in South America
- Indonesia
- Vietnam

The possibilities for Chinese to make a living in Holland lay, especially in the very beginning, in the Chinese restaurants that have arisen throughout The Netherlands. These were family businesses and everybody worked hard to contribute. This meant that people stayed within their own cultural group and did not have the time to learn the Dutch language and become familiarized with Dutch society. The children of this generation did go to Dutch schools and ended up in a bi-cultural environment. These children have found their way in Dutch society and no longer automatically end up working in their family’s business.

This development means that many of the older Chinese are about to become rather isolated. The idea that the elderly will be cared for by their relatives can no longer be taken for granted. Children often live elsewhere and cannot take on all the care that is required, because of study or work.

There are a number of Chinese communities that are, among other things, taking an interest in this group of elderly people in need of help.

“The Chinese Bridge” is a Chinese interest organisation in The Hague, actively working to achieve an all-embracing supply of care for the Chinese elderly. This stretches from supplying information about the available facilities to arranging funerals and dealing with the insurance policies that concern the care facilities. In other words, an integrated supply of care, in the shape and size best suited for Holland’s elderly Chinese. The idea is to find a place for these people within the existing facilities in The Hague, provided that these facilities are suitably linked to the group’s wishes and needs. The first possibility, “group-living” has already been realised. A number of group-living building complexes is already being used for several years now and many people are interested.

3. Possibilities for the Elderly in The Netherlands

Besides group-living, there are also supportive facilities that should allow people to live independently for longer. The possibilities available, also when independent living is no longer an option, are:

- Home care: domestic assistance and light care in people’s own home.

- Sheltered accommodation: a form of independent living, with the possibility of alarming for the assistance of a nearby retirement home. An employee from the retirement home will check on the residents and will arrange help from family or a doctor. Besides that, residents can use the services provided by the home; services such as meals, the hairdresser, pedicure and the like.
- Assisted living: private apartment with a living/bedroom, a small kitchen and a shower and toilet area. The assistance provided here consists of domestic help, personal (hygienic) assistance and, where needed, medical attention.
- Nursing home: When 24 hour-a-day medical attention is required.

All of these facilities are, in principle, accessible for all the Dutch people. That includes the Chinese that live in Holland. Together with the Chinese interest group The Chinese Bridge, the GDVV (retirement home Om en Bij and nursing home De Schildershoek) is working to develop a way in which all these facilities can be provided for elderly Chinese, so that it is well adjusted to their needs. This project has kicked off in 1999.

4. Activities to provide a well-organised supply of care for Chinese elderly

In the centre of The Hague we have the possibility to realise all the forms of care within each neighbourhood. The distances between various locations are small, employees from these locations know each other and all know the goals to be achieved. Collaboration is an obvious step.

- Information:

A group has been formed to inform people about the facilities available for the elderly in The Hague. This information is provided orally as well as in writing and needs a structural approach rather than being provided in a one-off event.

- Care adjustments:

At this time, several Chinese elderly have been taken into the retirement home as well as the nursing home. These people are being asked what they still think is missing and what they would like to see altered. Where it is possible, we will act accordingly. Such changes could be made in, for example, meals, relaxation facilities, celebrating religious or memorial days, and so on.

- Attracting Chinese/Dutch-speaking nurses :

Attracting Chinese employees can make an important contribution to the understanding of language and culture, bridging the differences that may arise. Especially when sickness and dependency are concerned, it is important for people to be able to express themselves in their own language, to express what they need and how they feel.

It is not an easy task to find people who speak Dutch fluently enough to be trained as a carer and to work as one. Dutch is an extremely difficult language to learn for Chinese, even people who have lived in Holland for a very long time can still have great difficulty speaking flawlessly. It is obvious that a professional career as a carer is not sufficiently known among Chinese, and therefore does not attract many people. We are now looking for young people who are fluent in both Dutch and Chinese, who are motivated to take up healthcare professionally.

This project will be running for a year, after which more action is undertaken and decisions will be made in order to achieve lasting results.