

Preface

In Western societies, the incidence and prevalence of respiratory and food-related allergies have increased rapidly over the past decades. The causes of this increase are not identified 'beyond reasonable doubt': a variety of hypotheses is under consideration, such as increased hygiene and intensified child-vaccination programmes. In addition, many other factors have changed in our life style that arguably may have relations with increased allergy occurrence: better housing insulation, major changes in the food production chain, increased air pollution with associated small particles that can carry over allergens, etc. We are witnessing a multi-faceted and complex development that needs very serious attention, as the societal impact is clear: loss of quality of life for those affected, even loss of lives in case of severe allergies such as peanut allergy or allergic asthma, and considerable societal cost, estimated at tens of billions of euros annually in the EU-25.

Like many medical conditions, allergy is characterized by a genetic and an environmental component. The genetic build-up of a population is not a constant, but changes at a much lower rate than the increase in the occurrence of allergies. Consequently, the causes of allergy increase must be found in our way of life in the broadest sense of the word: the way in which and the place where we live, which food we eat and how we prepare it, where we recreate and how we do this, etc.

So far, treatment of allergies has mostly been approached from a medical perspective. However, bearing in mind the likeliness that our lifestyle is strongly associated with the increase of allergies, an approach that investigates the potential of better controlling our living environment and food production chain and the choices that consumers make, seems very promising to pursue as a complementary approach to this medicalized problem.

During a Symposium in Wageningen, The Netherlands on 2-4 February 2004, organized by the Allergy Consortium Wageningen (an Expertise Centre of Wageningen University and Research Centre), internationally renowned experts discussed the possibilities to develop such preventive approaches. This book is a reflection of their views.

The editors express their gratitude to Paulien van Vredendaal, Jos Smelik and Petra van Boetzelaer for their valuable contribution to the preparation of this volume.

The editors,

Luud J.W.J. Gilissen

Huub F.J. Savelkoul

Harry J. Wichers

Robert J. Bogers

Wageningen, March 2005