Hendrik Johannes Thomasson was born in Hengelo (The Netherlands) on October 10, 1905, and graduated in medicine at the University of Utrecht in 1937. After spending some years at the laboratory of B.C.P. Jansen he entered the service of Unilever in 1941 and till 1968 he was head of the Biology Department of Unilever Research Vlaardingen. Until his retirement on November 1, 1970, he advised the management of this research centre on medicobiological matters.

From the beginning of his scientific career Thomasson has been greatly interested in the nutritional aspects of various dietary fats, among which rapeseed oil. In collaboration with Boldingh he demonstrated that erucic acid is the responsible factor in the growth-retarding effect of rapeseed oil. Partly on the basis of these investigations important studies have recently been performed as to the application of rapeseed oil in the human diet (see the articles by Abdellatif and Vles in this issue of Nutrition and Metabolism). Another important field of Thomasson’s investigations was that of the essential fatty acids. On determining the EFA-activity of various oils and fats he found that fatty acids with double bonds at the 6th and 9th C-atom counted from the terminal methyl group, have EFA-activity, the degree of activity being dependent on the chain length and the presence of further double bonds. By testing all possible intermediates he could make plausible that the conversion from linoleic acid into arachidonic acid takes place via y-linolenic acid and dihomo y-linolenic acid.

Thomasson extended his studies to the influence of dietary linoleic acid and other essential fatty acids on blood lipid composition, as the serum cholesterol level is an accepted risk factor in atherosclerosis. The results of these investigations were confirmed in a number of clinical studies which were and still are performed all over the world. In view of the correlation between blood lipids and atherosclerosis Thomasson himself performed many dietary studies on Trappist volunteers to find the optimum fatty acid composition for low est blood lipid levels. After Van Dorp found in 1964 that prostaglandins are biosynthesized from essential fatty acids, Thomasson became interested in the physiological activity of these prostaglandins. It appeared that prostaglandins have an influence on the
function of the heart and can inhibit the aggregation of thrombocytes, the latter being of great importance for the prevention of thrombus formation in the blood stream. Based on these facts, Thomasson postulated that increasing dietary linoleic acid might result in increased prostaglandin synthesis from dihomo-y-linolenic acid, so that at least part of the beneficial effect of linoleic acid on the prevention of atherosclerosis can be explained from an increased prostaglandin synthesis. The hypothesis puts Thomasson’s work on atherosclerosis, which at first was focussed on essential fatty acids, in a much wider perspective, which may result in further developments and applications in the coming years.

For his scientific work Thomasson was laureated by the Koninklijke Vlaamse Akademie voor Geneeskunde in 1958 (together with his coworker J. J. Gottenbos) and he received the Dr. Sael van Zwanenberg Award in 1967 (together with his colleague D. A. van Dobp).

Thomasson is a member of the European Group of Nutritionists and until 1970 he was on the Editorial Board of Nutritio et Dieta.

Select List of References


Dr. A. J. Vebgboesen