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Ageing as a Vegetarian and Vegan in the UK: Challenges and Barriers in Addressing their Dietary Preferences

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With an ageing population, there are more older people choosing to maintain a vegetarian and vegan diet to increase their years spent in good health⁽¹⁾. Research has focused on the dietary motivations for vegans or vegetarians associated with the health and social benefits, which includes better body composition (lower visceral fat, healthier body mass index), more positive nutritional behaviour (better knowledge on healthy eating, more vegetable, fruits and nuts consumption) and higher fulfilment in terms their role on benefiting animal and combating environmental degradation^(2–4). However, little is known about the challenges and facilitators for older people to maintain a vegetarian or vegan diet. This study aimed to explore the experiences of older vegetarians and vegans in accessing the food that meets their dietary preferences.

This research was carried out in collaboration with the Vegetarian for Life (VfL) society, whereby the respondents were members of VfL. Online focus group via ZOOM and telephone interviews were conducted among 17 older adults who were selected using purposive sampling. The average age was 78 years old (SD ± 7.04) and they were almost equally distributed in terms of gender (males = 8, females = 9) and were living in either rural (n = 9) or town/city (n = 8) areas. All 17 of them had been vegetarian or vegan for at least 20 years, and some of them transitioned from a vegetarian to a vegan over the years. They cook themselves (n = 10) or have partners/family members cook for them (n = 7). All of them had access to vegetarian food, often travel to get their choice or order it online and had no financial support.

Thematic analysis using an inductive approach was used to analyse the data, whereby six main themes emerged; *Rights as Vegetarian in living in Care settings, Support needed for Older Vegetarians/Vegans, Purchasing Vegetarian/Vegan Food, Older Adult's Understanding of Nutrition, Understanding Veganism and Expectations from Non-Governmental Organization (NGOs)*. It was evident that the advocacy of their rights as vegetarian or vegan was important to them, which will ensure their independence and uphold their rights when they are no longer able to decide. Guidance and information on nutrition, social elements of food consumption (e.g. eating out at restaurants and at other people's home) and purchasing (e.g. better labelling especially on plant-based alternatives) were needed.

The role of non-governmental organisation (NGOs) such as Vegetarian for Life (VfL) was regarded as crucial stakeholders in advocating and upholding their rights, while the role of other relevant stakeholders (government, care homes, hospitals) remains to be explored. Future research should explore food choices to meet nutritional needs and preferences in care settings for older vegetarians/vegans and, the impact of social connectivity on their consumption and food insecurity across diverse ethnic and lower socio-economic groups.

Acknowledgments

Vegetarian for Life UK Charity

References

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