
Introduction

Eilert Sundt (1817-75) has been regarded as the first epidemiologist in Norway. Trained as a theologist, during his work as a priest he got interested in daily life and living conditions of his parishioners, including diseases and causes of death. There is a line from his observations of poverty, morbidity and mortality to today's epidemiology and descriptions of social conditions and patterns of disease and mortality.

In the more than 150 years since Eilert Sundt published his observations, the pattern of diseases has changed dramatically, and the average life span has increased considerably. Tuberculosis and maternal mortality has nearly disappeared, and infant mortality has been considerably lowered. General morbidity has changed towards chronic illnesses like coronary heart diseases and cancer. However, patterns of morbidity and mortality is still socially differing, basically in the same way as in Eilert Sundt's days.

The reason for the great changes in morbidity and mortality has to be sought in better housing and hygiene, better nutrition and living conditions, as well as vaccination and better and more efficient health care. Systematic registration of diseases is one of the fundamentals of improved health care, in the beginning undertaken by individuals without scientific know-how, but as health registries and health analyses improved, the science of epidemiology emerged.

In this issue significant epidemiological research projects are presented, which have increased our knowledge about living conditions and factors affecting health status among Norwegians during 150 years. Also, we aimed to view epidemiology from the outside

by inviting researchers with background from social science and history in order to examine which conditions that affect epidemiological research.

The Norwegian Epidemiological association (NOFE) was established as late as in 1990. However, epidemiology as an academic discipline was established at the University of Tromsø in 1973 (professor Knut Westlund as professor in epidemiology and medical statistics). In 1977 epidemiology was established also at the university of Trondheim (Leiv S. Bakketeig, professor in epidemiology and social medicine). Later professorships in epidemiology were established also in Oslo (professor Dag Thelle) and in Bergen (professor Rolv Skjærven). Before this, a professorship in Social Medicine was established at the University of Oslo in 1952 (professor Axel Strøm). Social medicine was separated from Hygiene, which was one of the earliest disciplines at the University in Oslo (from 1827). Professor Axel Strøm became professor in social medicine, while professor Haakon Natvig took over as professor in hygiene. This underlines the long tradition of epidemiology in Norway although establishing it formally as a separate academic discipline is more recent.

We are grateful for the contribution of all authors. Each chapter stands independently. They cover different time periods and topics indicating the breadth of the discipline, ranging from social and environmental determinants to the molecular level and health services. This should provide clear evidence that epidemiology has become a key scientific discipline for health and medical research.

The guest editors



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