

Summary of the DES annual meeting October 2022 – a brief overview

The annual meeting of the Danish Epidemiological Society was held in Nyborg, October 25-26, 2022. The weather was mild and somewhat gray, and yet the view from the meeting room was scenic through the tall panorama windows toward the Great Belt Bridge towering over the dark sea. This might have been a distraction but the atmosphere was engaging and presentations were generally followed by interesting discussions.

After a short welcome by the chair of the society, Julie Dreier, the first speaker was Prof Allen Wilcox. Rather than giving a more speculative talk on the future of epidemiology (as first intended), he wanted to discuss, how science is actually conducted. Not in terms of the infrastructure, funding and technical aspects, but how great ideas are born. While rationality is the mask of good scientists, to be adored and expected at meetings, the real driver is intuition, passion and spontaneity, since they are responsible for conceiving sufficiently crazy ideas to change how we understand a subject. He made a passionate plea for a better balance between rationality and



imaginative intuition with wild guesses. The balance should include dedicated time for free thinking and he shared a recipe from Beveridge (author of “The art of Scientific Investigation”), with steps of immersion, confusion, take a break, and finally (hopefully!) the Eureka moment.

The second speaker before lunch was Prof Irene Petersen, who shared an overview of studies based on register data from the UK that she had worked on during her career. Her focus was the need for methods that can deal with the biases originating from how data are collected, how classification systems may change, how compensation to doctors may influence recordings, and

good old-fashioned confounding by disease severity. This variety of biases calls for more studies using a triangulation approach, where different data sources, different study designs and varying types of data are used to counter biases inherent in each separate approach. Irene highlighted the many uses of the UK general practice research databases (GPRD), which has no counterpart in Denmark currently.

After lunch the program consisted of a lecture competition and a session commemorating the history of DES – the meeting was dedicated to celebrate the 30 year anniversary of the society. Five contestants (Anne Gaml-Sørensen, Anne Kirstine Eriksen, Christine Leonhardt Sørensen, Mathilde Marie Brünnich Sloth and Fie Langmann) gave short presentations of their research with topics ranging from age at menarchy, healthy ageing, mental health, socio-economic position and life-style related disease to the effects of an EAT Lancet diet on body measures. In a very close race, participants in an online vote decided to award the price for the best presentation to Anne Gaml-Sørensen – congratulations! In the session celebrating 30 years of DES, Merete Osler had organized past chairs of the society to tell what had occupied their minds and been the focus of the society, when they were serving on the board. Many anecdotes came to light: Torkild IA Sørensen shed light on the very first beginning when written reports were shared between epidemiological research groups as a precursor for the society, Merete showed photos of her extensive collection of past issues of DESorientering, Ulrik Kesmodel had found one photo among a total of three available from a past meeting highlighting how changed things are (everyone now snaps lots of photos) and Lau Thygesen reflected on the period when GDPR was born. Julie Dreier ended the session with a focus on how the Covid pandemic at many different levels had impacted the work of the society.

The final lecture of the day was held by this year's recipient of the Schroll prize, Daniel Borch

Ibsen, who presented his work on methodology for emulating target trials in observational studies of diet and its impact on subsequent health outcomes.

Under the headings of the good, the bad and the ugly he illustrated the use of thinking from first principles in an attempt to arrive at well-defined hypotheses, which can be examined; using food matrices to better understand effects of one food component substituting another and how to address changes in exposure to different food over time.



The festive dinner was preceded by a poster presentation, for which Nanna Weyer received the prize for the best presentation, again after online voting by participants. Allan Linneberg, who called the society to arms (figuratively speaking) to stand up for the value of epidemiology and epidemiologists – society is in need of quality research and evidence regarding health, and we have a duty to contribute. Allan reminded us that we may well (quoting Thomas Nielsen, chair of the Danish labour union in the 1970s) have “sejret ad helvede til” (translated: won all the way to hell), since everyone is now an epidemiologist due to Covid, we as a profession still have an important role in sharing knowledge and insights.



In spite of the festive events of the preceding evening and late hours, the scientific program was resumed the following morning with two sessions on the use of statistical simulation in epidemiologic research and psychiatric epidemiology, respectively. The simulation session highlighted how simulation could play a role in investigating the potential impact of bias (presentations by Xiaoqin Liu and Andreas Rieckmann) and might be used for prediction of disease spread and hospitalization for Covid-19 (presentations by Henrik Støvring and Theis Lange). In the psychiatric epidemiology session a key statement was that if you cannot count it, it will not count, as John McGrath put it. He showed results from his five years as Bohr professor at the Danish National Center for Register-based Research, Aarhus University, where he and colleagues had not only mapped a disease, but created atlases mapping many (all?) diseases, both somatic and psychiatric. Merete Nordentoft discussed in her presentation how epidemiological evidence had been a pre-requisite for the new national 10-year plan for psychiatric care in Denmark, but also should be a key component in evaluating the impact of the plan. Finally, Reiner Rugulies presented his work on understanding how working conditions, in particular the psychosocial work environment, could influence the onset of depression.

After another lively discussion between presenters and the audience, the meeting was adjourned at noon with a grab and go lunch.