

The Anders Forsdahls prize 2008

Introduction by Finn Henry Hansen

This afternoon we are going to award the second Anders Forsdahl's prize for excellent contributions within the field of community and rural medicine. The prize was established two years ago at the annual meeting of The National Centre for Rural Medicine, in order to honour and praise the memory of the late dr. Anders Forsdahl, professor at the department of community medicine, University of Tromsø.

Anders Forsdahl was a dedicated community physician whose entrance into academic life occurred years after he had passed the age of 40. However, the observations made during his practice as GP in a mining and fishing community in the northernmost county of Finnmark during the sixties and early seventies, undoubtedly had a major effect on his later academic work. On the basis of these observations, he formulated the later well known hypothesis on the relationship between poor living conditions in childhood and important risk factors for (arteriosclerotic heart) disease in adult life. Comparing middle age (40-69) death rates among counties, he found a remarkably high correlation (.93) with infant mortality rates for the cohort 40-69 years earlier. Today this generic finding is known as the Forsdahl-Barker hypothesis, appreciating Forsdahl as the original source of the idea, and Barker as a later developer of this groundbreaking idea, (demonstrating the same relationship between inadequate nutrition in the foetus and risk of disease at the age of 50-60.)

Even after entering the professorship at the University of Tromsø, Anders Forsdahl maintained an enduring relationship with the community of Kirkenes, returning every summer to serve his patients. Everybody who enjoyed the privilege of knowing Anders Forsdahl, learned to appreciate his humble and honest behaviour as a person, and his combination of academic originality and dedication to the work of practicing doctors. For those unique qualities, this prize in memory of his legacy is established. Anders Forsdahl died two years ago, in 2006.

This years' prize is awarded to a person who started his academic career around the same time and in the same environment as Anders Forsdahl, when he arrived at the University in Tromsø in the early seventies. This years' winner – or should we say Laureate, a title generously suggested by Geir Lundestad, the Secretary of the Nobel Committee – is professor Olav Helge Førde, University of Tromsø.

Professor Førde's influence on medical education in Tromsø started even before he settled down in Tromsø. As a medical student in Oslo, Olav Helge in 1969

was recruited as a member of a planning committee preparing the new medical school and the new curriculum for this school. That his contribution to this work must indeed have been appreciated, is more than proved by the fact that the first president of the University – by intervention – managed to localize Førdes mandatory practice period (turnus), a requirement to be certified as a doctor, to the city of Tromsø. After finishing the mandatory hospital and primary care training, dr. Førde was soon (by telephone when on call) recruited as a research fellow to a major research project, known as the Tromsø Study. Even from this junior position, Olav Helge Førde played a major role in placing first year medical student in rural practices on different locations in Northern Norway.

For decades Olav Helge Førde made important contributions to the epidemiology of heart disease, with the pioneering and population based database of the Tromsø Study as the major empirical source. One of his publications – in the Lancet – on the relationship between (low level of) the so called good cholesterol (HDL) and incidence of coronary heart disease, was the most frequently cited biomedical article in Scandinavia for two consecutive years. In what turned out to be a global research race, this important piece of research was published one week before the well known Framingham study revealing the same fact. Another publication from Førde and his colleagues – in the New England Journal of Medicine – on the relationship between cholesterol (LHL) and intake of coffee, also added significantly to the merits of the Tromsø heart study.

Olav Helge Førde was appointed professor in epidemiology in 1986, and five years later entered another professorship dedicated to health services research. From this new position Førde initiated and supervised a number of research projects and eventually co-authored several articles with relevance for rural medicine. Among those we will in particular pay attention to the doctoral dissertation of Ivar Aaraas on the development and content of the cottage hospitals in Norway. We also would like to mention Førdes extensive contribution to teaching and lecturing, not only for students in Tromsø, but all over the country, and often to the benefit of health professionals located in geographically remote areas. As a public speaker his rhetorical power is well known, deeply respected and – sometimes – also feared. There may thus be moments when the audience has been happier than his opponents. Even so, his friendly manners produce few enemies.

Olav Helge Førde has been a member of a number of research and health policy commissions and councils, more often than not as chairman. He also has chaired panels and consensus groups on various health related issues. Foremost among those responsibilities is perhaps his four years as chairman on the Board of Helse Nord, The Northern Norway Health Authority from 2001-2005. In this

important but challenging role, Førde had the opportunity to apply a good deal of his broad body of knowledge, wisdom and sense of humour in tackling the most delicate intricacies the health services can offer. Needless to say, he survived with excellence.

As chairman of Helse Nord, Førde initiated an important policy report on decentralization of specialist health services, emphasising the opportunities for delivering more ambulant services closer to people's homes. This report was presented in his last Board meeting as chairman, thus closing the good circle of work for rural and community medicine that started when he was a medical student in Oslo nearly forty years ago.

We congratulate this year's winner of The Anders Forsdahl prize, and ask Olav Helge Førde to come forward to receive the symbols of this reward, a lithography and a diploma. So far, lacking a local Dynamite Alfred (Nobel), there is no cheque enclosed. But a lot of honour!