

Introduction

by David H Wegman, MD,¹ & Christer Hogstedt, MD²

In an amendment to the government assignments for 2005, the Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research (FAS) was commissioned to:

“... analyse Swedish research in the area of occupational health, primarily chemical, physical and biological health risks, and research on musculoskeletal strain injuries and disorders including the interaction with mental stress. The task includes an inventory as well as an evaluation of carried out research. The evaluation will consider scientific quality of the research as well as its relevance to society. The task should also shed light and comment upon the future needs of national research within this area.”

The aim of this evaluation was to assess the scientific quality and to identify gaps, weaknesses, and strengths of parts of Swedish work environment research—in accordance with the aforementioned assignment—from an international perspective. The charge did not include the individual evaluation of psychosocial research on the work environment by researchers or research groups. Since most Swedish experts in this field were included in the evaluation themselves, international experts were required for an unbiased evaluation. Hence an international evaluation group (IEG) was appointed.

The group of international experts was appointed by the Swedish Council for Working life and Social Research in 2006. The group included Professor David H Wegman (Chair), Professor and Dean, School of Health and Environment, University of Massachusetts Lowell, USA; associate professor Alex Burdorf, University Medical Center Rotterdam, Netherlands; Paul Oldershaw, PhD, UK Health and Safety Executive, Great Britain; Professor Brigitte Schulte-Fortkamp, Institute for Fluid Mechanic and Technical Acoustics of TU Berlin (ISTA), Germany; and Professor Eira Viikari-Juntura, Musculoskeletal Centre, Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, Helsinki, Finland.

A secretariat in support of the evaluation was organized by the Council. This effort was coordinated by Professor Christer Hogstedt, National Institute of Public Health, together with Professor Kenneth Abrahamsson, Ms Carin Håkansson, and Ms Elisabeth Birke from the Council. An inventory of work environment

research was based on a survey managed by the National Institute for Working Life [Arbetslivsinstitutet (NIWL)]. The library at the Institute also provided a listing of all relevant Swedish doctoral dissertations since 1941.

Professor Olle Persson, Umeå University, assisted the international group with a bibliometric analysis of published reports. Mr Svante Sjöberg provided information on the history and present situation of Swedish funding in work environment research. Professors Staffan Skerfving and Hans Welinder, Lund University, submitted reviews of the history of Swedish occupational medicine and hygiene research, and Professor Töres Theorell provided a discussion on the history of psychosocial research in Sweden.

In order to prepare for the evaluation, an initial meeting was held to determine what types of information would prove the most useful to the effort. Decisions were made on the selection criteria for research groups or projects to be included in the evaluation, the division of labor, whom to invite for interviews, the interview questions, the design of a bibliometric study, and the like. It was decided that the Council would send a letter to approximately 70 research groups that, in a previous survey, had reported performing research in the relevant areas. A letter of inquiry to each identified research group sought documentation on peer-reviewed scientific papers in English (published since 1 January 2001) that were judged to be of the highest scientific quality with respect to filling gaps in knowledge or enhancing current understanding in the relevant scientific area: (i) 1–2 papers for groups of less than 5 fulltime equivalent researchers, (ii) 1–5 papers for groups of 5–20 fulltime equivalent researchers, and (iii) 1–10 papers for groups with more than 20 fulltime equivalent researchers. Each group was also asked to give 1–3 examples of the application of or communication in scientific knowledge designed to bring such knowledge to the broader community of stakeholders (developed or produced since 2000). Examples of such products could include those related to the focus of this evaluation and that (i) could provide evidence of implementation for prevention or the control of occupational hazards, (ii) were designed

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to communicate scientific information to occupational professionals or other stakeholders, (iii) could lead to guidelines or regulations for occupational health, (iv) could lead to product development for the protection or promotion of the health of the workforce.

The evaluation group also met with representatives of various stakeholder groups and representatives of the research groups. The participants in these meetings were asked to consider a set of questions for the meetings (see the appendix). The Council secretariat received research material from approximately 60 research groups; this material was subsequently dispatched to the International Evaluation Group for its assessment in advance of its final meeting.

The International Evaluation Group met over a 5-day period to review all of the material submitted, interview stakeholders and researchers, and prepare a draft of the final report. In the subsequent month, this report

was completed by correspondence and presented in a seminar for the work environment research community. Thereafter the report was finalized and submitted to the Council for its consideration.

This supplement provides, for the first time, the history of Swedish work environment and occupational psychosocial research. The timing is appropriate as it is exactly 100 years since the Section for Occupational and Environmental Health of the Swedish Medical Society was inaugurated, and many of its members have been given due credit in the texts. The supplement also provides a summary on the context of the Swedish work environment, actors, and researchers and the final report of the International Evaluation Group (somewhat abbreviated). In addition, a commentary has been provided on the lessons learned from this evaluation and from a similar exercise concerning Swedish public health research that was completed 2 years earlier.

Broad overview of the history of Swedish occupational health research

by Staffan Skerfving, MD,¹ Christer Hogstedt, MD,² & Hans Welinder, PhD¹

In this section, different aspects of Swedish occupational health research are presented, generally according to the following organization: (i) the underlying structure of Swedish research, development, and education (ie, institutes, university departments, and hospital clinics), (ii) major research areas, and (iii) the influential researchers associated with this work.

Research in a particular area is understood to have been initiated in a certain time period, after which continued success evolved over time. In this description, the full account for the different major research developments have been placed in the decade when each accelerated with subsequent follow-up to the present, in order to give continuity to the evolution of the area being described.

To select “influential” researchers in a certain area is, to say the least, a difficult task. This description does not aspire to completeness. Many other researchers have made important contributions, but completeness would have gone far beyond the aim, which was to give a short overview of the strengths and weaknesses of Swedish research in occupational health.

In addition, the potential number of original articles that can be quoted is enormous, which is why only the names of the research group leaders have been included, omitting graduate students and other researchers who appeared originally. The interested reader is thus urged to look for the original papers, in which case the name of the senior scientist can be used as an entrance into the database.

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