

This conference was organized in honor of Lennart Levi, who recently retired after a long career as professor at the Karolinska Institute and director of the National Institute for Psychosocial Factors and Health.

Lennart Levi is an unusually successful scholar. Nowadays we know him primarily from his activity as a teacher — of very large groups of experts and laymen nationally and internationally — of psychosocial stress and its effects. He started his career with successful scientific experiments that have had a great influence in this field. Due to his early scientific writings, the field of psychosocial stress obtained high status in Sweden.

Levi started his university studies in psychology at the university in Stockholm in 1950. He shifted to medicine after a year and completed his studies at the Karolinska Institute to become a licensed physician in 1959. Until 1958 he was a physician at the National Rehabilitation Clinic in Stockholm. In 1959 he started his famous Stress Research Laboratory in collaboration with the departments of internal medicine and psychiatry at the Karolinska hospital. This center was designated as a WHO collaborating center for research and training in psychosocial factors and health. In 1980 Levi had convinced the parliament and the government of the importance of the relationship between psychosocial factors and health. Accordingly the National Institute for Psychosocial Factors and Health was founded that year. Over the years, Levi has had many important assignments as an expert or chairman of national and international societies related to his field of expertise.

Sixteen of Levi's most famous writings have been collected in one volume (1). The contents of these writings range from the effects of piece work (forced with varying speed) and night work to unemployment and population health and from more environmental to more individual aspects (the individual aspects being exemplified by stuttering and the acute effects of alcohol and caffeine on physiology).

In his capacity as head of the Stress Research Laboratory at the Karolinska Institute and the National Institute for Psychosocial Factors and Health, Levi has had a very central position in the development of Swedish stress research. The studies that he published with co-workers on the physiological effects of piece work and work at night in the 1960s and 1970s were timely. They were influential in the formulation of the Swedish work environment law in 1976. His group participated in an extensive nationwide effort to spread knowledge regarding psychosocial work conditions during the 1970s and 1980s in Swedish occupational health care via the big occupational health care organizations, particularly the one for state employees (Statshälsan).

It is interesting to observe the chronological order of Levi's studies. The first line of research dealt with fundamental aspects of stress. What happens when subjects are exposed to extremely stressful conditions — such as facing an audience as speaker when you are a stutterer or being deprived of sleep for 3 days and nights while being forced to perform precision work? The focus then gradually shifted to the public health aspects of stress. During the later years of his career, Levi was very much engaged with questions dealing with the growing prevalence of unemployment in Sweden. The sequence seems logical since we have to know the fundamental aspects of stress before we can interpret stress phenomena in the public health perspective.

Levi has been an unusual researcher in the sense that he realized the importance of the translation of scientific results into public actions. Accordingly, he devoted a substantial part of his time to lectures to national and international lay audiences and to contacts with politicians and administrators.

Although Levi has retired as director of the National Institute for Psychosocial Factors and Health — which he created — his different interests are represented among the research groups at the Institute. His old interest in adversities created by shift work is represented by Torbjörn Åkerstedt, who has been

very active with his co-workers in creating methods for measuring the effects of shift work and characterizing sleep and tiredness at work by means of physiological and psychological methods. Unemployment is a research field that is still alive in Kristoffer Konarski's research and in ongoing psychosocial and physiological longitudinal studies of men and women who participate in regional programs for diminishing the effects of structural unemployment. Structural work environment factors are being confronted in epidemiologic studies by Töres Theorell in collaboration with several other institutes and departments in Stockholm. Immigration is studied by Solvig Ekblad and her collaborators. Psychosocial aspects of rehabilitation are studied by Aleksander Perski and his group.

New fields have also been added. Part of these are still highly relevant to worklife, for instance, research on the work environment of health care and new developments caused by information technology, both areas of particular interest to Bengt Arnetz. Other fields are of a more general nature, such as suicide research and prevention (Danuta Wasserman), gender research (Kristina Orth-Gomér), and the use of art in psychosocial treatment and prevention (Theorell and Konarski).

We wish Lennart Levi a successful continuation of his career in postretirement.

References

1. Four decades of Lennart Levi's research: a selection. Stockholm: Statens Institut för Psykosocial Miljömedicin, 1990.
2. Arbetsmiljölagen 1976 [Swedish law on work environment]. Stockholm: Statens Offentliga Utredningar 1976:1.