

Barbro Westerholm, 1933-2023

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A pioneer has left us.

Barbro Westerholm would have turned 90 this year.

Barbro Westerholm, Stockholm, has passed away. Her next of kin are Peter, children, grandchildren, and many many more.

Admired by many, Barbro had an impressive career. As she often emphasized herself, she has sat in many chairs over the years, both in academia (as professor), Authorities (Director General, the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, WHO, member of the Geriatric Expert Group at the European Medicines Agency), Public Interest organizations (Swedish Pensioners' Association), The right to a dignified death, Doctors against tobacco and as a respected Politician in the Swedish Parliament (Liberal Party).

Her book "On never giving up" in 2021 testifies to her broad social involvement.

However, her pioneering work in the field of drug safety has not received the same attention.

I have had the privilege of collaborating with Barbro for 50 years on what is now called pharmacoepidemiology. After the thalidomide disaster in 1961, side effect reporting was established in Sweden in 1965, with Barbro as secretary of the adverse drug reaction committee. She had a solid background as a PhD in pharmacology at Karolinska Institutet. She realized that it was difficult to evaluate adverse drug reactions without knowing how drugs were being used.

Barbro wrote about the 36-year struggle to create a register of drug use, which only came about in 2005. Before that, we had to rely on data on sales and prescriptions. At a meeting with the WHO at Karolinska Institutet Huddinge Hospital in 1972, we presented data on the sales of some drug groups, the embryo of the volume and classification system (DDD/ATC), now recommended by the WHO and established worldwide.

Barbro's pioneering efforts in drug safety were noticed in connection with the fact that in 2011 it was 50 years since the birth defects of thalidomide were discovered. The International Society for Pharmacoepidemiology awarded Barbro Westerholm, and Frances Kelsey who stopped the registration of thalidomide in the USA, a Lifetime Achievement Award in Drug Safety in Chicago in 2011.

As her book contained limited information on the history of pharmacoepidemiology, where Sweden had an internationally prominent role, the intention was to summarize this in a separate book. As the book on ageism was also written with Barbro, this dragged on. On January 24 (photo), Barbro and I had a lunch meeting about the pharmacoepidemiology book. We decided to meet on March 10. But then Barbro was in hospital. On March 11 came: "Thank you, thank you, thank you for all the fun we had together, and I hope you can write a good book about our history. Hug hug hug." On March 14, the news came that Barbro had passed away. The loss is enormous.

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