

In memoriam: Leif Svanström (1943–2023)

Dale William Hanson ¹, Robert Ekman,² David Sleet ³

¹College of Public Health, Medical and Veterinary Sciences, James Cook University, Townsville, Queensland, Australia

²Faculty of Health and Life Science, Department of Biology and Environment Animal Welfare, Linnaeus University, Kalmar, Sweden

³CDC (Ret), Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Correspondence to

Dr Dale William Hanson, College of Public Health, Veterinary Sciences and Rehabilitation Medicine, James Cook University, Townsville, QLD 4810, Australia; dale.hanson@jcu.edu.au

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ABSTRACT

Leif Svanström, born in Västervik, Sweden, on 30 October 1943, was a big man in physical and intellectual stature, persona and impact. Leif trained at Lund University, obtaining a BA in Genetics and Society in 1966, an MD in Preventative Medicine in 1972 and a PhD in Accident Prevention and Injury Control in 1973. He was appointed associate professor in the Department of Social Science at Lund University in 1978 and subsequently professor of Social Medicine at the Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, Sweden, in 1980. The research group he led generated over 30 doctorate dissertations, 6 professors, more than 1000 papers and 20 textbooks. In 1989, he chaired the inaugural World Conference on Accident and Injury Prevention in Stockholm, Sweden, a conference that remains the premier international forum for injury prevention and safety promotion. Leif championed place-based, analytical, interdisciplinary, intersectoral, real-world injury prevention and safety promotion practice, culminating in the development of the Safe Community Model that spread internationally and ultimately created a network of over 430 designated International Safe Communities, with a population footprint of over 100 million people. For all these laudable achievements, it was Leif's charismatic ability to inspire, teach, support, motivate and sustain those around him that produced his profound impact on the practice of injury prevention and safety promotion throughout the world. Leif Svanström passed away in Sweden on 29 January 2023 at age 79.

Leif Svanström was born in Västervik, Sweden, on 30 October 1943.

Leif was a big man in physical and intellectual stature, persona and impact; a man of big plans, totally committed to the premise that injuries could be prevented on a global scale through the application of evidence-informed local action; a man with a big heart, who gave himself unreservedly to those around him; a passionate man, who invested wholeheartedly to everything he did.

Leif trained at Lund University, obtaining a BA in Genetics and Society in 1966, an MD in Preventative Medicine in 1972 and a PhD in Accident Prevention and Injury Control in 1973.¹ After post-doctoral studies in occupational health and social medicine, Leif was appointed associate professor in the Department of Social Science at Lund University in 1978. The research group he joined adopted an analytical, action-oriented approach to the study of injury, widening opportunities for prevention to include factors involving host, agent, the physical and social environments.^{1–3} Leif's doctorate investigated the causes of injury on stairs in collaboration with a team of architects, anatomists, physiologists, engineers and clinicians from Malmö General

Hospital. The Malmö group went on to undertake systemic studies of home and occupational injuries. This place-based, analytical, interdisciplinary, intersectoral approach to injury prevention in real-world practice laid the methodical foundation for Leif's subsequent work.^{1,4}

Political leaders in Skaraborg County, Sweden, approached Leif for support in the implementation of a community-based injury prevention programme in their county. Together with his PhD student Lothar Schelp, they developed an 'all ages/all genders/all environments/all situations' community-based programme. After 3 years, the injury rate in Falköping (the intervention community) decreased by 23% while Lidköping (the control community) remained unchanged. The programme was subsequently implemented in Lidköping, Motala and Falun. The Falköping programme generated numerous publications and four academic theses laying the groundwork for the subsequent development of the Safe Community Model that soon spread internationally.^{5,6}

Leif was appointed professor of Social Medicine (a division of the Department of Public Health Sciences) at the Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, Sweden, in 1980, and professor *emeritus* in 2010.¹ The research group generated over 30 doctorate dissertations and six professors. Leif authored or coauthored more than 1000 papers and 20 textbooks.^{1,5} The WHO Collaborating Centre for Community Safety Promotion (WHO CCCSP) was established at Karolinska in 1989 to support the ongoing development of a worldwide Safe Community Network.

In 1989, Leif chaired the first World Conference on Accident and Injury Prevention in Stockholm, Sweden, attended by 500 delegates from 50 countries⁷ who together drafted the 'Stockholm Manifesto' asserting that, 'All human beings have an equal right to health and safety', and that 'Safety was a universal concern and responsibility for all'.⁸

This conference remains the premier international forum for injury prevention and safety promotion researchers and practitioners. Leif remained on the International Organising Committee of this conference for over 20 years.

Leif believed deeply in breaking down the barriers between research and practice, travelling the world to connect researchers, politicians, administrators and communities, to create a network that grew to over 430 designated safe communities, with a population footprint of over 100 million people, who promote, sustain and transmit evidence-informed real-world injury prevention and safety promotion practice.

In 1991, Leif was a visiting scientist at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,



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Division of Injury Epidemiology and Control (now the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control), in Atlanta, Georgia, where he helped build support for the development of state injury programmes with a focus on safety promotion. His work spawned the National Network for Safe Communities, and an internationally recognised action research centre at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City.

In 1998, the American Injury Control and Emergency Health Services section of American Public Health Association acknowledged Leif's outstanding academic contribution by bestowing the International Distinguished Career Award.^{1,3} He also received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the European Association for Injury Prevention and Safety Promotion in 2006 for his 'outstanding contributions and prominent role in the development of safety promotion'.¹

Leif was a trailblazer who challenged the status quo, promoting and applying radical paradigm shifts that have fundamentally changed injury prevention and safety promotion research and practice.

- ▶ Research that focused on the causes of injury, not just the incidence of injury.
- ▶ Research that targeted the systemic factors that cause injury, not just behaviour.
- ▶ Interventions that targeted whole populations, not just individuals.
- ▶ Interventions promoting the positive, wholistic social phenomena of well-being, health and safety⁹, not just the physical phenomenon of injury prevention.
- ▶ Interventions involving real-world application, not just controlled experimental studies.
- ▶ Programmes that treated the target community as partners rather than subjects.

It is easy to forget that many of these ideas, considered best practice today, were revolutionary in their time.¹⁰

As required by Swedish legislation Leif officially retired in 2010 but continued to work at Karolinska on a voluntary basis until the closure of WHO CCCSP in 2012. Leif observed that 'being "retired" offered the possibility of renewal', investing in the Safe Community Network with renewed vigour, breathing life into the movement he had nurtured through his career.

In 2012, the International Safe Communities Certifying Centre was established to support ongoing accreditation of International Safe Communities, worldwide, with Leif as the inaugural chair.

For all these laudable achievements, it was Leif's charismatic ability to inspire, teach, support, motivate and sustain those around him that produced his profound impact on the practice of injury prevention and safety promotion throughout the world. Theodore Roosevelt observed that, 'people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care'. Leif cared. He cared about his peers, his students, the safe communities and the people that made up the communities. He cared about their needs, aspirations and achievements. They were not the subject of an intervention; they were the intervention. They were his peers, his colleagues and his friends. Leif's enthusiastic, totally committed, completely engaged, caring persona united an international network of safe communities around his vision to make the world a safer place to live, work and play, one community at a time.

Leif Svanström passed away in Sweden on 29 January 2023 at age 79. He is survived by his wife Kerstin and their four children, Dong, Daniel, Karl and Charlotta.



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ORCID iDs

Dale William Hanson <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0393-3987>

David Sleet <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6165-3289>

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