

Obituary

VILHELM MØLLER-CHRISTENSEN MD 1903–1988

Vilhelm Møller-Christensen died at the age of 85 in his home town of Roskilde, Denmark, on 15 November 1988. In 1941, as a general practitioner with a special interest in medical history and paleopathology, he began a series of excavations in the burial ground of a large medieval Augustinian Abbey in Aebelholt, North Sealand. Three years later he unearthed a skeleton with puzzling bone changes which he suspected might be due to leprosy, even though it was not customary in the Middle Ages to bury leprosy sufferers in monastic cemeteries. As these puzzling bone changes could not be explained by contemporary leprologists and paleopathologists, he decided to gain information by finding the graveyard of one of the 30 or more St Jørgen's (St George's) hospitals which were thought to have housed Danish leprosy sufferers in the Middle Ages. Hearing that human bones had been accidentally unearthed near Naestved, South Sealand, in the region where a St Jørgen's hospital had existed, he began a systematic search for the site. Travelling from farm to farm making inquiries, he reached a dairy farm where the owner admitted to having found human bones when digging a drain in the farmyard, so in 1948 he began exhumations at this site, aided by Naestved Museum and the National Museum of Copenhagen, and funded by the Carlsberg Foundation. Further work revealed that he had found a St Jørgen's hospital, which had existed between 1250 and 1550, thus establishing that leprosy was a health problem in north-west Europe in the Middle Ages. The last exhumations were carried out in the summer of 1968, enabling him to complete his meticulous studies of skeletal material from about 650 persons, bringing to light some previously unknown changes of leprosy, particularly those in the rhinomaxillary region of the skull which he named *facies leprosa*. He recorded his observations in a number of papers and books, the last being *Leprosy Changes of the Skull* (1978).

During these years he studied clinical leprosy in Malaya and Thailand, and visited leprologists and paleopathologists in various capitals of Europe, accompanied by his inseparable travelling companions in the form of a selection of bones and skulls from Naestved. When I spent a week with him in 1963, looking for signs of *facies leprosa* in the skulls of the Catacombs in Paris, I recall marvelling at the unconcerned way in which he walked through the streets carrying skulls in a string bag, oblivious of the sidelong glances of passers-by!

In 1964 Vilhelm Møller-Christensen was appointed Professor of Medical History at the University of Copenhagen, later becoming Professor Emeritus, and in the same year he was appointed Director of the University Medical History Institute and Museum. In the latter capacity he spent much time and care in establishing within the Museum a leprosy section containing the best osseous material from Naestved. He was President of the Danish Society of the History of Medicine from 1964 to 1974, and Director of the World Health Organization Institute for the History of Leprology in 1973. Honours conferred on him included that of Knight of the Order of Danneborg (1954), and Commander of the Papal Order of St Silvester (1973).

Vilhelm Møller-Christensen has won a well-deserved place in the annals of medical history, leprology, and paleopathology.

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