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Covid-19: Sweden vows greater protection for academics as researcher quits after aggressive social media attack

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The Swedish government has said that it will strengthen laws on academic freedom after a leading Swedish academic announced that he was quitting his work on covid-19 because of an onslaught of intimidating comments from people who disagreed or disliked his research findings.

Jonas F Ludvigsson, a paediatrician at Örebro University Hospital and professor of clinical epidemiology at the Karolinska Institute, published a research letter online in the *New England Journal of Medicine* on 6 January presenting data which showed that relatively few children in Sweden became ill from covid-19 during the first wave of the pandemic.¹ Sweden was one of the few countries to keep schools and preschools open during spring 2020, so the data were among the first collected on the risks to children.

The study found that, from 1 March to 30 June 2020, 15 children aged 1-16 in Sweden were treated in an intensive care unit for covid-19 or for multi-inflammatory syndrome (MIS-C), which has been linked to covid-19.

Ludvigsson said at the time, “That is the equivalent of 0.77 intensive care patients per 100 000 children in that age group. Four of the children had underlying diseases. None of the children died within two months after their period of intensive care.”

After the letter’s publication he was bombarded with angry messages through social media and email criticising the study and inferring that it and Ludvigsson were representative of the country’s covid-19 containment strategy. Sweden, which has recorded more than 12 000 deaths from covid-19,² eschewed lockdown and trusted people to distance themselves, although tougher restrictions were introduced in November.³

The experience has taken its toll on Ludvigsson. He told the journal of the Swedish Medical Association (*Lakartidningen*) that for a week he woke up at 3 am every night and could not get back to sleep and that he had now lost his “appetite for covid-19—both when it comes to speaking out and researching.”⁴ He has decided to quit researching and debating covid-19.

He is trying to put the experience behind him and has said that he will not talk to the media about what happened. However, he told *The BMJ* that, although the findings were published in a research letter, this was “an actual study” that underwent formal external peer review, including statistical peer review, and the manuscript was revised four times before it was published.

Intimidation and threats against academics have risen with the growth of social media, and

uncertainties and diverse opinions about covid-19 have added to the situation. In response, Sweden is planning to provide increased support for academic freedom through an amendment to its Higher Education Act.

Increase in threats

Matilda Ernkrans, Sweden’s minister for higher education and research, told *The BMJ*, “It is deeply concerning when academics are threatened to the extent that they don’t have the courage to keep on doing their job. This is not a new phenomenon, but we have seen an increase of threats against academics related to research on the coronavirus. When people are silenced, it’s a threat against the freedom of speech and our democracy.

“To strengthen academic freedom, the Swedish government has proposed a new amendment that points out that education and research must be protected to enable people to freely discover, research, and share knowledge.”

Ole Petter Ottersen, president of the Karolinska Institute, told *The BMJ* that he found the increase in threats and harassment towards researchers very worrying.

“A tough debate and a diversity of opinions based on facts and evidence are necessary elements of science and public discourse, but hateful and scornful accusations and personal attacks cannot be tolerated. We already see that researchers retreat from the public debate after being threatened or harassed, and in my own institution a leading researcher just decided to give up his covid-19 research for the same reason,” he added, referring to Ludvigsson.

Research and debate on covid-19 is vital because “the coronavirus did not come with a handbook,” Ottersen added. “In a situation with so many unknowns it is more important than ever that opinions are voiced and experts heard, even if their opinions run counter to current policies.”

Tackling this requires awareness and action at many levels, he said, including by the government, the police, the legal system, and university leaders. Universities have a responsibility to urge researchers “to keep a decent tone in debates and discussions,” he added. “We need to ensure that our researchers understand the concept and value of academic freedom and the responsibility that comes with it. Here we still have a way to go.”

1 Ludvigsson JF, Engerström L, Nordenhäll C, Larsson E. Open schools, covid-19, and child and teacher morbidity in Sweden. *N Engl J Med* 2021;384:669-71. doi: 10.1056/NEJMc2026670. pmid: 33406327

2 World Health Organization. Sweden: WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard. <https://covid19.who.int/region/euro/country/se>.

- 3 Paterlini M. Sweden restricts gatherings to eight people as cases reach record highs. *BMJ* 2020;371:m4508. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m4508 PMID: 33214157
- 4 Trysell K. Risk att forskare skräms till tystnad [Risk that researchers are intimidated into silence]. *lakartidningen.se* 2021 Feb 10. (In Swedish, translatable to English).

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