

Introduction to the special section on drinking patterns in older age

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The following five articles describe the status of and examine trends in older people's drinking patterns in recent decades in Denmark (Jensen et al., 2020), Finland (Tigerstedt, Härkönen et al., 2020), Norway (Bye & Moan, 2020) and Sweden (Raninen & Agahi, 2020). Since the 1980s alcohol consumption in these and many other countries has become more widespread in older age groups. This is particularly true for women. That drinking has become more common in older age is no surprise. Better health, higher income, increasing years in retirement, growing life expectancy and cohort-specific shifts in attitudes towards drinking all have tended to contribute to increased alcohol consumption. In fact, in many countries, alcohol consumption has become an

integral part of social life among people in retirement age.

The combination of alcohol consumption and old age is a special one (see for example, Meier & Seitz, 2008). While a glass or two may make everyday life more festive, alcohol at the same time may have unexpected consequences particularly among older people. Old age in combination with alcohol use is accompanied by several risk factors such as a weakened sense of balance, decreased body water content, changes in metabolism, increased and more regular use of prescription medicines, declining mobility and functionality, as well as living alone. Taken together, this implies an elevated risk profile for older persons, which may be regarded as the reason for which

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drinking in old age has been a topical public concern in the 2000s.

However, the focus of this thematic collection of articles is not on risks or problems, but on drinking patterns. This is because there has been a lack of both recent country-specific analyses of drinking patterns in old age in the four study countries and of comparisons across these countries.

“Drinking patterns” is a multifaceted term. In order to provide a basic but still informative view of status and trends in drinking in the four countries, we have broken down drinking patterns into four different aspects of drinking. These are: prevalence of current drinking, prevalence of frequent drinking, average amounts of alcohol consumed, and prevalence of heavy episodic drinking. The articles do not deal with other aspects of drinking patterns, for example, characteristics of drinking occasions. This is primarily because we lack comparative data beyond the four above-mentioned indicators.

The four country reports are followed by a concluding (secondary) comparative analysis of similarities and differences in status and trends in drinking with regard to the four indicators of drinking patterns (Tigerstedt, Agahi et al., 2020). By this comparison, we hope to raise awareness of the similarities and differences in drinking patterns between the four countries, between men and women, and between specific age groups among older people.

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