

Health: From national duty to private matter

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Today health is a matter of living a risk-conscious lifestyle and being in control of one's body and life. Yet 100 years ago, health was not a private matter but rather a national duty. This is found in a new doctoral thesis in religious studies from the University of Gothenburg.

By analysing [health](#) publications from 2009 and the years 1910-13, Wilhelm Kardemark was able to shed light on how popular views of health have changed over time.

'The changes in the views of health seem to be closely linked to changes in the views of human beings. Some changes are a result of changes in medical perspectives. And some are of a more general nature and have to do with perceptions of what people should strive for and what should be important in life,' says Kardemark.

The changes in the way people are looked upon and in the understanding of health can be viewed in light of the relations that make health important. A hundred years ago, the health of the individual was portrayed as a national resource. Today health has become a [private matter](#) and something that is related to the closest family and friends, but most of all to the individual's goals and hopes. With the older perspective, a sense of belongingness motivates people to stay healthy.

'The nationalistic perspective of [health issues](#) from the early 1900s is nothing new. What's new, though, is the clear impact that Lutheran perspectives had on the view of health. As I show in my thesis, many of the assumptions about health we see in the health publications of the

time should be approached in relation to a Lutheran view of man. This view implies an emphasis on work as a way to serve others, where [masculinity](#) and health are interlinked.'

The view of the [human body](#) also points to fundamental changes with respect to view of man and the understanding of health. Today, health and the body are often portrayed as something controllable and as matters of active choices that the individual is responsible for. Processes at the [cellular level](#) can be supported with a 'correct' lifestyle and eating habits.

'The ambitions are often set high when it comes to "maximising" and "optimising". You're supposed to always get the most out of food, exercise and life in general. The key word is control, and this is alternated with views that emphasise the importance of experiencing one's body or of feeling how great for example exercise can feel.'

Being aware of common views of health and critically relating to them is important in the sectors of healthcare and education.

'But I also want to point to the importance of findings like mine in the growing health and wellness industry. It is important that for example personal trainers are familiar with common perceptions of health and exercise since their clients may very well have them,' says Kardemark.

Provided by University of Gothenburg

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