

Kalle Achté

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KALLE ACHTÉ, emeritus professor of psychiatry at the University of Helsinki, died in Helsinki on 30th January 2019 at the age of 90 years. A notable reformer of the study of psychiatry in Finland and an advocate of international collaboration and the promotion of mental health, he was elected a member of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters in 1982.

Kalle Achté was born in Mikkeli on 11th September 1928 into the family of a forestry officer, passed his matriculation examination in 1947, went on immediately to study medicine at the University of Helsinki and graduated in 1954. He began his working career as a medical officer in a country district, where his general interest in people led him to choose specialization in psychiatry. This meant a return to Helsinki and employment at the Lapinlahti Hospital. At the same time he began his long-term association with patients who had suffered brain damage in the war. He qualified as a specialist in psychiatry in 1960 and completed his highly regarded doctoral thesis on the course of schizophrenia and its prognosis, *Der Verlauf der Schizophrenien und der schizophreniformen Psychosen*, in 1961. The study of psychoses and self-

destructive behaviour, together with work on the prevention of suicides, formed the core of his activities throughout his career. He was appointed docent in psychiatry at the University of Helsinki in 1963.

The next step in Kalle Achté's career was his appointment as chief physician of the Hesperia Psychiatric Hospital in Helsinki, which provided him with an opportunity to reform the whole system of psychiatric treatment in Finland in accordance with the latest international models. He himself qualified as a psychoanalyst in 1969 and made regular appearances on the Finnish radio over the next fifteen years, so that his pleasantly suggestive tone of voice became familiar to many listeners. He also worked continuously as a psychiatrist and psychotherapist until well after his 80th birthday, deriving much benefit from his innate gift for developing a deep professional interest in his patients.

It was in 1968 that Achté gained the position of professor of psychiatry at the University of Helsinki, in connection with which the referees for his appointment attached particular value to his psychiatric investigations into brain damage and his broad-based studies of psychoses. Here,

too, he immediately set about reorganizing the work of the psychiatric clinic and initiating numerous other development projects. Especially important for him personally were the inauguration of the Foundation for Psychiatric Research and the closely related commencement of the series of publications entitled *Psychiatria Fennica*.

The years 1968–1991 were exceptionally fruitful ones for Kalle Achté as professor of psychiatry at the University of Helsinki and chief physician at the Lapinlahti Hospital, which formed part of the university hospital. Constant efforts were being made to improve the status of patients, increase the knowledge and skills of the staff and revise the basic training provided for doctors and the advanced training for specialists. Together with two professorial colleagues, he produced the first textbook of psychiatry to be published in Finnish, and many generations of doctors will remember his pioneering work in the use of television for teaching purposes. He introduced televised interviews with patients into his lectures and in this way both opened up his own ways of working for evaluation by the students and gave the psychiatric patients an opportunity to tell their own stories so that future doctors could have a better understanding of such patients.

As dean of the Faculty of Medicine in 1978–81 Kalle Achté managed to act as a link between his professorial colleagues at the same time as establishing good, lasting relations with the highest level of the university administration. One important achievement of his was the creation of a chair for a Swedish-speaking professor of psychiatry. Another of the interests that he developed in the course of his career

was in the history of medical studies, and especially of psychiatry, and he also served for a long period as head of a department and museum devoted to the history of medicine as well as publishing numerous papers and books on the topic.

Achté was an amenable and practical person in everything that he did; he always had time for other people and showed them understanding, but also allowed them space of their own and the opportunity to act independently: “Let all the flowers blossom”. It was during his occupation of the professorship in Helsinki that modern psychiatry established itself in Finland, and his extensive network of international contacts undoubtedly helped it to rise to the forefront of development as a science. In this respect, the work that he did on behalf of the World Psychiatric Association and for the international organization for the reduction of suicides, together with his collaboration with mental health organizations in other countries, lay at the core of his international activities. Even so, he also found time for study journeys to many countries and himself belonged to numerous international mental health societies and was an invited member of a number of European academies of science. This meant that he also played an important role in international meetings, symposia and conferences arranged in Finland in the 1970s and 1980s, many of which gave rise to scientific publications aimed at an international readership.

Kalle Achté was eager to appear in public as a spokesman on behalf of psychiatry and mental health and frequently did so. He was a clear, persuasive speaker, and a good forum for this purpose was provided by his long term of service as an official of

the Finnish Mental Health Society, which extended from the 1960s up to his retirement years. Meanwhile, his predilections for the past and for literature and writing were reflected in the number of books that he produced, the best-known of which were a history of the Lapinlahti Hospital in Helsinki and studies of the Finnish authors Aleksis Kivi and Uuno Kailas.

Alongside his university work and clinical activities he also found time and energy to act as a consultant for private patients, to undertake various forms of ancillary work, to involve himself in private-sector projects of various kinds, to take exercise and to pursue his main hobby, political history. Apart from attending to the affairs of the Foundation for Psychiatric Research that he had instigated, he was also on the administrative boards of several other foundations and acted throughout his career as a medical advisor in insurance matters.

Well to the fore in all these undertakings, however, were Kalle Achté's humane attitude towards other people and his desire to serve the common good. Straightforward relations with friends and collaborators, courage, optimism and a subtle way of doggedly carrying forward the most difficult of projects were characteristic qualities of everything that he put his mind to. He was always anxious to be friendly to others and to ensure that they were taken into account, and he gave people his full attention no matter how busy he was. In his work he had the knack of imagining himself in the position of his patient and projecting a feeling of closeness while still keeping his distance and showing a professional respect for the patient.

Among the many honours that Achté received during his career, in addition to

membership of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, were honorary membership of both the Finnish and the World Psychiatric Association and invitations to membership of numerous international associations and scientific communities. He was also awarded the medals of a Commander of the Order of the Lion of Finland and a Commander (First Class) of the Order of the White Rose of Finland, and one permanent monument to his work on behalf of psychiatry and mental health will be the Kalle Achté Prize, one of the most significant awards to be granted by the Foundation for Psychiatric Research with the aim of passing on the message of the importance of these topics for future generations.

Kalle Achté performed efficiently in both his work and his leisure-time activities. He was tireless in the sports that he pursued, chiefly running, skiing and rowing both alone and in the company of others, but although he stretched himself to the limit, he would always be ready to care for others. Health worries were frequently at the back of his mind, however, and the danger of a fatal outcome was close at hand at one point, when a bacterial infection literally broke his back during his last year in office, 1991, to the extent that he was still recuperating at the time of his farewell lecture. He later described his feelings upon contracting a serious illness in his book *Kun lääkäri sairastuu* (When the doctor falls ill, 1993).

Even so, he was able to lead a healthy life well into the new millennium, for although he could no longer engage in sports, he had more opportunities to devote to writing, reading and spending time with his friends and relatives. There was no longer the same need to be efficient. His children and their families became the

most important things in his life, and towards the end he was moved to state that happiness comes from children and work:

"Happy is the person who gets on well with others and is not weighed down by feelings of guilt."

Obituary by Jouko Lönnqvist