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ABSTRACT

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Interpretation of illness and use of history
A modern notion of sin as link between causes of illness
and roads to healing

My study examines the interpretation of illness and use of personal history among a group of Scandinavian patients with extraordinary medical histories, collected in the Registry of Exceptional Courses of Disease at NAFKAM, University of Tromsø.

The study is based on the registration forms filled in by all the patients in the Registry by 1.1.2007 (109 patients) and on qualitative, in-depth interviews with a strategic sample of 7 patients diagnosed with cancer and MS.

The study demonstrates that patients, based on their own illness, perform an active memory work linking past, present, and future together. They find causes of their illness in their recent and personal past. Existential strains and crises, psychological tendencies, and the lack of ability to handle social demands and challenges, is often thought to create the illness. The patients regard themselves to be part of the problem creating their illness and therefore they also see themselves as part of the solution.

In this way my study identifies a distinct relation between the comprehension of cause and the personal efforts. I suggest that a modern notion of “sin” is the focal point of this relation. The patients still consider sin as a cause of illness, but one no longer sins against God or one’s neighbor, rather against oneself. Sin has been secularized, and its foundation is no longer collective and religious, but individual and psychological. The road to partial or full recovery is therefore generally tied to the individual’s own effort, flexibility and ability to change personally as well as in regard to way of life.