

The Ventegodt case in Denmark: When scientific disagreement becomes personal prosecution

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Abstract

In the history of medicine there has been many examples of disagreement or discourse between various professionals. Just take the example of homeopathy, which became popular in the United States and Europe in the 1800s with support from royalty, entrepreneurs, literary giants and religious leaders, but at the time strong opposition from established medicine. The conflict between homeopathy and orthodox medicine has been long and also bitter. Over the past ten years we have seen another disagreement between holistic or alternative medicine and established medicine in Denmark, where one physician with an open mind and approach towards holistic medicine has been prosecuted by the established medicine. There was no winner in this fight and hopefully, we will discover that a “fight” over healing is inappropriate and that various approaches to healing are all necessary to build a comprehensive and effective health care system.

Keywords: Complementary and alternative medicine, holistic medicine, public health, Denmark

Introduction

In the year 2012 the Danish physician Søren Ventegodt had his medical license temporarily revoked, in a process that started seven years earlier, namely already in 2005. At that point in time Ventegodt had gained fame and he was among the well-known medical doctors in Denmark and also the doctor who had collected the most money for research in holistic medicine in Northern Europe (about 8 million EURO) and recognized as the a leading scientist in his field by systems like Medical Expert (www.medicalExperts.com), Google Scholar and other expert systems based on the count of scientific papers in the scientific databases. He has been known for his radical ideas about healing: that everybody should find their own healing potential if they got

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sick, and that drugs should be avoided, if possible at all (1-6).

Background history

Søren Ventegodt has co-authored a six-volume textbook series on evidence based holistic mind-body medicine (7-12) and been practicing evidence-based medicine based on the old Hippocratic tradition of talk- and touch medicine (13). He received for many years as a general practitioner all types of patients, including a large number of young women, who suffered from a chronic state of a combination of physical, mental and sexual problems, known to be long-term and very difficult to cure. Most of these patients simply have their problems for life, and their severe condition a hindrance for both learning and studying and for establishing relationships and family.

Ventegodt, known to be a reader of science, had noticed that thorough evidence both of quantitative and qualitative nature (including the writings of Freud, Adler, Jung, Lowen and especially Wilhelm Reich and Harold F. Searles) suggested that if such patients were treated as sexological patients - i.e., with a focus on their sexual problems and psychosexual developmental disturbances - they could often be cured, even if they had symptoms characteristic of the most severe mental disorders like bi-polar disorder or schizophrenia (14). Ventegodt had read Hippocrates (the Corpus Hippocraticum) (13) and learned that the traditional cure for such patients in the days of Hippocratic medicine, which was generally practiced in all Europe up till the 1800, was talk-therapy combined with touch-therapy, especially of the form of the sexological manual treatment “pelvic physical therapy” (often called “physical therapy for the pelvic floor,” “vaginal massage” or “vaginal acupressure” in contemporary research) (15, 16).

After further reading he realized that this treatment, also according to the contemporary science, was the only evidence-based and effective cure for a long list of sexological problems, like anorgasmia, female reduced desire, vulvodynia and coital pains and discomfort (dyspareuni) (17).

In the year 2003 Ventegodt took the consequence and made a sexological division of his “Research

Clinic of Holistic Medicine” in Copenhagen, Denmark and the many students at his clinic, about 20 students at the time, started to learn to practice this method also. Understanding that the intimate, sexological treatments offered a huge number of ethical challenges he enrolled himself in a program in medical ethics at the Norwegian Trondheim University. He also realized his insufficient knowledge of psychoanalysis, psychotherapy and complementary, psychosocial and integrated health sciences and therefore enrolled in a master-program study at the Austrian university Inter-University College, Castle of Seggau, Graz. Here he soon was acknowledged for his insight in the process of healing, and after receiving his degree he was appointed Director of a new Nordic Campus of the university in Copenhagen (2006-2008).

From fame to fall

One reason for Ventegodt’s raising to fame was a four-story building called the “House of health” in the center of the old town of Copenhagen. This house was in the year 2000 offered to his project by the IMK-Foundation (IMK Almene Fond og IMK Erhvers Fond). The building was changed according to his wishes for three million Euros into the most modern and sparkingly fashionable, holistic medical clinic and research center in Europe.

Ventegodt was a popular speaker; he had already given more than 1,000 lectures and public speeches and spoken to many Danes at these arrangements. More than 300 of the biggest companies in Denmark had used his services and many more had bought his book on “Quality of working life” (Arbejdslivskvalitet), which in a few years sold 20,000 copies (18). In the year 2004 he appeared many times in the major Danish media with a number of appearances in the nine-o-clock news (DR-TV Avisen) talking about his work on quality of life and his research findings from a major research project with 10,000 Danes. In 2004 he even managed to start his own free-of-charge, monthly newspaper “New medicine” (Ny medicin) with a series of interesting articles on healing, holistic medicine, and sexological treatment of chronic patients with a

combination of sexual, physical, and mental problems.

In the years 1994-2004 his institute arranged a bi-annual international conference on scientific holistic medicine, which attracted hundreds of international experts and a number of big public events like the Dalai Lamas visit to Copenhagen in 1996, which was organized from his research center.

Ventegodt was very critical about the development of the public health system, where more and more Danes received pharmaceutical drugs and he was especially against the increased administration of psychopharmacological drugs to children and young people. After a long series of successful treatments and clinical studies, where he documented that at least 50% of his patients were healed after only 20 sessions of intensive holistic medical treatment in his clinic (19-25), he was convinced that he and the international team of scientists he was a part of had found the solution for the most urgent medical problems: new and better ways to treat patients.

Around the year 2005 he had gained so much self-confidence and felt the scientific evidence so convincing that he believed that he and his organization alone could create a public debate strong enough to initiate a change in the ways patients were treated in Denmark. He optimistically launched a campaign in the “New medicine”, which he believed would cause a shift in the way people were thinking medicine in Denmark. His newspaper was released in the streets of Copenhagen in tens of thousands of free copies. But he was mistaken in his optimism.

A public scandal

In 2005 he was suddenly framed as a sex-criminal: a physician who sexually abused his patients. Three psychiatrists from Ventegodt old work place, the University Hospital, in an alliance with the boulevard press “Ekstra Bladet” accused Ventegodt of using unscientific, alternative treatment methods with his patients, motivated by his personal sexual interest in the patients. The story had all the ingredients – sex, abuse and a famous doctor – to be good entertainment. The scandal even reached the major evening news, which went uncritical with the story

and later had to bring a public apology for misinforming the viewers.

It was an enormous scandal, a scandal that for many days filled the front pages of the boulevard press. Ventegodt’s medical license was three weeks later “temporarily” revoked on the suspicion that he was abusive to his patients and he was at the same time reported to the police by the National Board of Health (Sundhedsstyrelsen) on this suspicion.

In early 2006, the police made what they called “a very thorough investigation” (26, 27) and interviewed all his female sexological patients, but without finding one single dissatisfied or complaining patient. The Police reacted strongly upon this finding in the defense of Ventegodt; the Copenhagen Police Commissioner went public and declared that Ventegodt never had been even close to breaking any criminal law; and that there was not even one single complaint from any patient (26, 27). None of his patients or former patients went against him after the scandal rolled in the media, which is highly unusual (the Police had never seen this before in other cases of suspected sexual abuse), and after interviewing almost all the female patients (and looking at hundreds of patient files) the Police could only conclude that “all patients had received a good treatment” (27).

During the initial part of the year-long scandal a number of patients (73 former patients) wrote to the National Board of Health, the Ministry of Health and directly to the Minister of Health to say that they have been helped by the treatment, often with problems that other physicians for years had been unable to do.

A fight against the system

Now, when Ventegodt came out clean, many felt that Ventegodt should have received an apology from the national Board of Health and they should have given him his medical license back. But this did not happen.

It turned out later that the three psychiatrist going against Ventegodt in the media had a close friend and collaborator working as the chief psychiatry consultant in the National Board of Health (Sundhedsstyrelsen). This person took initiative to a closer examination of Ventegodt’s practice, where all his case-records were analyzed to find possible errors he had made. 500 case records were electronically

analyzed with help of two medical experts and three experts from the police; 47 case records were initially picked for deeper analysis, and for the next seven years these 47 case-records were analyzed and systematically criticized.

Ventegodt was for all these years forced to answer many letters from the National Board of Health and other agencies (like the Patients' Complaints Council). He patiently and thoroughly explained his methods and delivered all the scientific documentation proving he gave the correct and appropriate treatment according to normal practice of evidence-based medicine. Instead of writing research articles he was for years forced to write thousands of pages in a dialog with the public authorities, who investigated him. Endless resources in money and work hours were spent by the Danish State in an effort to prove that Ventegodt was a dire physician, in spite of not even a single complaint from any of his former patients.

Later it emerged that the continued attack on him come from this person within the National Board of Health, who even the National Board of Health and Ministry of Health since the beginning of the scandal had judged to be disqualified, biased and not objective and thus unable to handle the case. Ventegodt was able to document this in the court later using letters he had received from the Danish health authorities (28). A number of psychiatric experts were subsequently hired by the state to take part in the battle on the side of the official system.

Had the Danish system been based on science and anchored in evidence-based medicine, Ventegodt would without any doubt had won this battle, because he had science on his side. But the system is not based on science, but on expert-statements and in this case it seems as if the psychiatrists worked hand in hand and one supported the other. Other professionals were not asked and certainly not physicians that have experience in holistic care of the kind that Ventegodt provided his patients.

The next step in the process was also critical. A court-case was now initiated by the National Board of Health against Ventegodt and the patients who had been pleased with their treatments were now directly offered money if they agreed with the accusations against Ventegodt brought forward by the prosecutor. These offers also came to people who had never been

patients but only were his students, and as such had received the treatment as part of their own training. These students had been amongst the most supportive of Ventegodt in 2005, when he was framed as a sex criminal. One of the leaders of the student groups had even gone to the news to defend the method of vaginal acupuncture, which she had received as a part of her own training and which she said helped her immensely with her own sexual problems. The money they were now offered was a "compensation for loss of honor," which was the only possibility for compensation, as they already had stated that they had not in any way been abused sexually.

None of his patients accepted the offer, but two of the students did. In 2012 the case finally reached the court and one of these students gave testimony in this court case, claiming that Ventegodt had encouraged her to take illegal drugs and treating her without the correct professional distance. This statement together with critical remarks from the forensic medical psychiatrists made the court decide to again temporarily revoke his license for another five years. Interestingly the court did not forbid Ventegodt to practice medicine, he only lost the right to prescribe the drugs he did not use anyway, so the sentence did not change anything at all in Ventegodt's practice as an alternative therapist and his medical research clinic could remain open.

Realizing that the court ruling did not stop him from the right to practice medicine and also that the court case never could be won the way the Danish medical laws are constructed (giving absolute power to the psychiatrists) and also understanding that an appeal only would postpone the date of the return of his medical license, Ventegodt decided not to appeal the verdict. After seven years of constant unpaid work with the court case documents and with the possibilities of more legal expenses, there was no way Ventegodt could continue the fight.

A one man fight

In a fight where a single person is up against the state apparatus, as in Ventegodt's case, the state with its endless resources and infinite time simply wins. But this does not mean that Ventegodt is wrong about his

medicine and that the Danish state is right about the use of psychiatric drugs instead of psychotherapy.

Every person who, as I have done myself, has followed Ventegodt for many years, knows that he is a brilliant human being, hardworking and honest doctor who is going to extremes just in order to help his patients. He is a decent person, he has never abused anybody, he has never violated any ethical rules of his profession (like sleeping with a patient) as far as I know and he had always been scientific in his approach and open about his work and all problems related to it.

It is totally understandable that he has collected a large group of potential enemies, especially amongst psychiatrists working with psychopharmacological drugs, which he is totally against (29). His popularity and his success rate with individual patients in his safe alternative and holistic clinic has been a problem for many traditional biomedical physicians.

Imagine that you as a doctor gets criticized by “the system” and that an army of experts suddenly are spending days and weeks going through everything you wrote in your case records to find all that is wrong – in spite of the patients being happy, satisfied and well helped in your clinic. Imagine that every questionable decision you made as a doctor suddenly is brought to you with critique totally out of proportions so you have to defend yourself for years. How would you like that? How likely is it that these experts will find nothing to criticize, if they went through all your case records with the most critical eyes? Imagine now that they did not find anything you did wrong, as was the case when they first looked into his case-records. Imagine now that the critique is made by a group of “critical experts” who have the power to define what you are doing as wrong or right as they please without any need of providing scientific evidence. What would you do? Of course you would provide the scientific evidence yourself, to prove them wrong, right? Imagine now that they continue to criticize you, in spite of you delivering the scientific evidence for the validity and appropriateness of the treatments you gave, and that the court by law are told to follow these experts statements and ignore the evidence you present. How would you feel by being a part of such a system?

With all this said it is a wonderful thing that the court ruled that Ventegodt can continue his medical

research and his alternative-medical treatments. There is according to the court finding nothing dangerous or bad about them, they are just not accepted as medical treatments in Denmark today.

Conclusion

Ventegodt is still running his clinic as he has done for the past 30 years. I think he is a healer that has helped many patients and also a person with a scientific mind that always tries to question the issues of body and mind and the effect on health and how to find ways to use this connection to help and benefit patients to heal from within. To be an instrument and facilitator that brings out inner strengths in his patients to heal themselves.

I think his method is effective and totally safe, which can help many patients and especially patients with chronic diseases to bring forth inner strength in a holistic way to heal. I think of him as a good friend, a researcher and good human being that has been misunderstood by the “establishment” and I always feel sorry that he did not become a professor of social medicine, because I know he would have been a brilliant teacher, who would do anything to help and facilitate his students to learn more and more. For these good reasons we celebrate him in this issue of the *Journal of Alternative Medicine Research*.

The purpose of human life is to serve, and to show compassion and the will to help others.

Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965)

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