

# Magnus Huss : The Pioneer who Coined the term 'Alcoholism'

Dr. Ashoka Jahnavi Prasad

**A**lcoholism is one of the major public health challenges in all parts of the globe. It poses enormous challenges, both social as well as medical. The challenges vary in different parts of the world but no healthcare system can ignore the problem and its consequences.

While there is still no consensus on the most appropriate measure of dealing with this problem, the insights that we have gained through the pioneering researches over the last two centuries have equipped us with many outstanding tools to combat the deleterious effects and minimize the mortality which was unbelievably high in those days. Some parts of the globe have a very high incidence. I commenced my medical career in the Irish Republic and trained as a psychiatrist in Edinburgh, Scotland. In both these countries, the incidence was staggeringly high.

However it was not an Irishman or a Scot who provided modern medicine the insight that alcoholism was truly an illness and needed to be treated as such, and not such a manifestation of a major social ill that it was perceived to be. People with the problem were ostracized and in the absence of a defined medical approach, the mortality rate was frighteningly high. The physician who enlightened us in this regard was a Swedish by the name of Magnus Huss.

Huss was born in Medelpad, Sweden on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of October 1807. His father was a very popular pastor of the local Lutheran church and while the family had very strong political links, he never displayed any interest in politics. It was during his early adolescence that he began to wonder whether the social ostracization of those with alcohol problem was the right way to tackle the problem. Always deep in contemplative

activities, he began to wonder whether this was compatible with the Christian virtues that his father was actively promoting.

In the early stages, he expressed interest in taking up philosophy as a career. He obtained a bachelors and later a masters in philosophy at the University of Uppsala before deciding to embark on a medical career. While recognized as a brilliant student, his penetrating questions mostly of a philosophical bent tended to make him somewhat unpopular with his teachers. Nevertheless, he graduated with honours and after a very brief spell as an assistant professor at the Serafimer Office, was appointed assistant professor at the Karolinska Institute.

Scandinavia as a whole and Sweden in particular was going through a very rough economic time and Huss felt that in order to gain comprehensive training, he had to move to France and Germany. He lived in these countries and for a short period in Austria, the phase that he described as professionally most satisfying of his professional life. He returned to Sweden to take up a senior position at the Serafimer Clinic. Historians of Swedish medicine claim that this was the first medical clinic in Sweden. Here he introduced the techniques of physical examination that he had imbibed during his sojourn in the other countries. The reforms he introduced were regarded as revolutionary at the time.

Very soon he was appointed the Director of the College of Health, the regulatory body that was responsible for health policies in Sweden. By that time, he had built up a very busy medical practise which made his decide to resign from this position. It was Huss who initiated and later built up the very healthy tradition of



**Dr. Ashoka Jahnavi Prasad** is identified as the most educationally qualified person in the world by The Polymath. He has a dynamic resume with a PhD in history of medicine from Cambridge, LLM from Harvard among other notable qualifications. Dr. Prasad has also worked as a consultant to the World Health Organization (WHO) and helped prepare two of their reports.

writing scientific papers in his country. He published several papers many of which became classics. His paper on typhoid fever led to revolutionary healthcare reforms. This also earned him the membership of the French Academy of Sciences which was regarded as the most prestigious scientific honour in the European mainland. He also published a paper on management of pneumonia which was considered path-breaking in those times. Fully committed to development of public health services in his country, which in those days was considered a developing nation, he used all the authority at his command to initiate the building of the first nursing home and the first institution for childcare.

But it was his innovative work in mental healthcare that ensured his place in the all time greats of his profession. He was the very first person in Europe who strongly campaigned for the uncontrollable desire to drink to be seen as an illness. In this endeavour, he faced many formidable hurdles not just from the establishment but from his own profession as well. His more than a dozen papers on alcoholism and its symptoms are amazing when seen in the context of the times they were written. In fact, the picture of alcoholism he presented has not changed much despite the passage of time. I had the good fortune of perusing the work

in the original Swedish bit. Even a translated version would be most instructive to the younger members of the profession.

The term that he coined viz 'alcoholism' gained acceptance and popularity and he was frequently invited to address several major scientific bodies. Towards the later part of his life, he had gained enormous popularity in his country - almost to the point of veneration. Small wonder that he was ennobled and admitted to nearly every learned scientific society in his country. He also had a successful stint as a parliamentarian where his zeal for healthcare development and reform remained undiminished. Later on, retired to a small parish in the Kalmar region where he spent his last days.

Let us salute the pioneer who gave us so many valuable insights which continue to aid us in our profession.

**Footnote:** Alcohol addiction is described very succinctly in the *Charaka samhita* which is considerably before Huss's time, but it was not translated until a few decades ago. Hence Huss's work would have to be regarded as original and therefore revolutionary in every regard.



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