

Profile

Kjetil Søreide: rising young surgeon, adept with pen and scalpel

Chairs in surgery seldom arrive early in Norway; recipients are often aged at least 50 years. Kjetil Søreide, Professor of Surgery and a consultant gastrointestinal surgeon at Stavanger University Hospital, in Stavanger, Norway, was granted his in 2011. At the age of just 34 years he became the youngest person ever to be appointed to a Norwegian surgical chair. So what propelled him through this age-related ceiling? Professor Nils Erik Gilhus, a neurologist and head of the University of Bergen's Department of Clinical Medicine where Søreide also works, points to the key factor. Besides being talented, he says, "Kjetil started his research very early".

Søreide himself is inclined to agree—at least about the research. Modesty may prevent him making claims on talent, but an interest in the scientific underpinnings of his discipline was a feature of his career from the outset. "I had an unusual track record compared with most of my colleagues in the academic field", he says. "Surgeons are often focused on developing their technical skills. But I stepped out of training to do a PhD on translational work in colorectal cancer. I wanted to build a strong track record in research." And that is what he continues to do.

During his surgical training he also did editorial work for the *Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association*. He enjoyed it. Seeking more of it, 2008–09 saw him holding an editorial assistantship with the *British Journal of Surgery*. "We look for people capable of conducting high quality assessments of scientific work who can write and edit well", says the journal's current Co-Editor in Chief Derek Alderson, Barling Professor of Surgery at the UK's University of Birmingham. "Kjetil ticked those boxes. The people who apply to be editorial assistants are all highly gifted individuals from across Europe, but he was a cut above the rest. He's very well read across the whole of general surgery, which is unusual for many young surgeons nowadays. Their focus often becomes quite narrow at an early age. One of Kjetil's strengths is his breadth." When a vacancy on the *BJS* full editorial team opened up, Alderson had no hesitation in inviting Søreide to join it, which he did in 2010. "The pen can sometimes be more powerful than the scalpel", jokes Søreide.

Søreide had been able to polish up his English during a teenage year in the USA where his father—also a professor of surgery, and also at Stavanger—spent 12 months working at the Mayo Clinic. Although interested in the natural sciences, the young Søreide couldn't see himself taking up science as a profession until, that is, he realised that his interest could be pursued within the context of medicine. As with a third or so of would-be medical students in Norway, a shortage of places drove him to study

abroad. He chose Germany, graduating from the University of Freiburg in 2002. Despite an initial reluctance to follow in his father's footsteps, it was surgery that eventually claimed him when he returned to Norway. "Working with your hands, being in one-to-one contact with patients, was something I really liked", he says.

Søreide has two broad areas of interest. "One is in cancer research with a focus on registries and on developing translational research", he explains. "The other is in trauma and emergency surgery." He finds this breadth of interest stimulating, and points out that insights from the one not infrequently prove useful in the other. He leads Stavanger University Hospital's Surgical/Gastrointestinal Translational Research Unit. "Our main task has been in colorectal cancer where we're pursuing new biomarkers to predict which patients will have the most favourable progress. We have two molecular biologists in our lab collaborating with our pathologists and oncologists." A lot of translational research, he says, has focused on the end stage of the disease; their interest is in the early stages.

The Series papers on emergency surgery by Søreide and his colleagues in this issue of *The Lancet* illustrate two of his qualities: a grasp of the literature; and an urge to dig below the surface, to get to the root of things. On the poorly understood causes of appendicitis he comments, "I think it's really surprising and disappointing how little we understand of such a common disease. It think it reflects that a lot of the focus and research funding goes into areas that attract more media attention." He sees something similar in our current grasp of the other topic that he and his co-authors tackle in this issue: perforated peptic ulcer. "Compared to the number of patients, not only in Europe but worldwide, it is surprising that so few studies have been done."

Hartwig Kørner, a Professor in the Department of Gastrointestinal Surgery at Stavanger University Hospital, first met Søreide in 1996 when he was working in Freiberg. "Besides his intelligence, he is able to see what is important, and how to achieve it. He is goal directed, and he finds good ways to reach his goals. He's someone who is very clear in what he's saying. He says what he thinks in a way you can respect, even if you don't agree." Gilhus describes Søreide as "friendly and easy-going", but wonders for how long the University of Bergen and Stavanger University Hospital will enjoy his presence. Other institutions in Norway and beyond would like to recruit him, he says, and some have tried. Norway is a small country; the world is big.

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See [Editorial](#) page 1212

See [Series](#) pages 1278 and 1288