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## **Introduction**

*Lars-Göran Tedebrand*

Twenty years ago our knowledge of the decline in western mortality was fairly rudimentary. In England there was little factual material available for groups below the peerage in economic and social status. As far as other countries are concerned, available data for France strongly suggested a lower mortality rate in the second half of the eighteenth century than in the first. Even Swedish data pointed in the same direction.

As a result of the vast expansion of historical population studies during the last decades the main features in the mortality decline have been revealed. In most western countries expectation of life at birth improved during the 19th century. Death rates fell much more heavily among children and teenagers than among adults. However, further studies have revealed interesting national irregularities in the decline of infant and child mortality. Decisive changes in adult mortality did not occur until after 1900. Still we know too little about the details in the epidemiological transition.

The causes of the remarkable decline in crude death rates and the changes in the disease panorama have been under intensive debate during the last 10-15 years. The view that the decline should mainly be attributed to improvements in medical technology has been vigorously challenged by, for instance, Thomas McKeown. According to McKeown long-term changes in mortality rates ought to be explained by advances in material conditions especially nutrition and possibly housing standards.

As is well-known, McKeown in his turn has been challenged in recent years. Historical demographers have argued that the modern rise of population in England, for instance, depended more on a rising birth rate explained by changes in nuptiality and age of marriage than on a falling death rate. The complexity in the nutrition-morbidity/mortality link has been discussed. Other principal explanations as alternatives to nutrition have come into focus: reductions in the virulence of pathogens, acquired immunities, public sanitation etc. The decline in mortality now seems to have been conditioned by a series of complex and often interwoven factors: social, economic, cultural, medical, political, psychological and biological. The real scientific answers to the complexity in the mortality decline and the general improve-

ment in people's health can only be isolated by using a broad interdisciplinary approach.

A variety of materials, methods and theories are used by researchers from different disciplines in many countries when analyzing the determinants behind the changes in morbidity and mortality during the demographic transition. Some of them are reflected in this report volume from the international conference "Society, Health, and Population during the Demographic Transition" held at Umeå University, 18-21 August, 1986. The following sessions were organized: Infant, child and maternal mortality; Causes of death and classification of diseases; Urban disease and mortality; Society and medicine; Health and nutrition and Changes and patterns in rural mortality. All the papers and most of the comments are included in this volume. The comments refer to the original and unrevised versions of the papers.

The organizers and the editors want to express their gratitude towards the funds and the contributors who made the conference possible.