

THE FATHER OF DANISH EPIDEMIOLOGICAL AUTISM-RESEARCH JOKED ABOUT BEING READY TO KILL TO MAKE HIS WAY IN THE WORLD

Three former employees at the once so dollar-gilted danish research unit, North Atlantic Neuro-Epidemiology Alliances (NANEA) tell danish newspaper Information about their years at the CDC-sponsored research unit.

Now NANEA is dead, the creator of it all, Poul Thorsen, has disappeared, and the former employees are talking about a story of seduction and propaganda

WHEN THE AGITATOR CAME TO THE UNIVERSITY

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The research unit Nanea should have been the best in the world. Today the catchwords have died, the group has disintegrated, and the chief of it all has run away to the USA followed by suspicions of fraud for millions. And the funkis villa that housed the dream is empty and deserted.

“I am ready to kill to make my way”.

The sentence touches a nerve in Anja, when she listens to her chief talking about the ambitions that is the drive of his career. For one thing he is joking, but joke and seriousness are as it is wellknown complementary quantities, and Anja has seen and heard it all before. For many months she has worked at the research unit Nanea at the University of Aarhus. During that time she has experienced her chief, when he explains, that he is willing to sacrifice a friendship for an occupation, and that he does not care, whether there are more qualified candidates, if he himself is getting there first. Anja has seen what happens, when a new article is ready for publication, and the researchers are fighting about the order of names in the byline of the article.

As time goes by Anja is also aware, that she is not thriving in that game, and that her career must have another turn.

What she does not know, is that Nanea as an entity is heading for disaster.

The adventure starts long time before in the year 2000. Here a lecturer sets a research project to sea that has the scope to match any vision for the new millennium.

For several years the researchers at North Atlantic Neuro-Epidemiology Alliances are going to investigate data in big registers to find connections between the lifestyle of pregnant women and the abilities of their children later in life.

The data material is probably the biggest in the world and several other pioneer research projects are started around the first one. Same standing has the creator of the project. Poul Thorsen is the man with the high grin. He is the one with the millions from the USA, that make the research possible and life a journey in luxury for the employed. It is him with the plans and the plates that describe, how Nanea is going to take world dominance, and it is him that makes the unit dance to his wishes, even when they sense, that something is wrong.

For Poul Thorsen is also the entrepreneur. Few months after his conversation with Anja he steers the University of Aarhus into what looks like a historical scandal about fraud with research grants

for more than 10 millions of crowns, where he himself plays the main part as the answer of the academic world to Stein Bagger of the executive world or Amdi from the Tvind-cult (legendary danish media-figures of financial scandals).

At the beginning of spring 2009 a suspicion is growing in the upper administrative layers at the University of Aarhus. Something is wrong in the unit at Institute of Public Health. Nanea has not that amount of money available, that the director of the project makes it seem. Poul Thorsen has left. The year before he went to Atlanta, and from there he manages the research.

But in the month of march precisely a year ago the exile-lecturer finally loosens his grip on his unit. While the university is digging in obscure relations concerning the financing, he gives notice of his employment. In may the University of Aarhus reports to the police, but not until February this year is the scandal reported in the danish media.

Several millions is lacking in cash at the University of Aarhus and it looks like a case of fraud. Someone has falsified signatures at declarations of research grants at the research unit at the university. Maybe there is money, which has disappeared, and the star of the unit has received double salary as fully employed at both the University of Aarhus and a university in Atlanta.

Poul Thorsen has not yet been charged for the false signatures and the black holes. But suspicion sticks to the man, who was the father of Nanea, it's leader and wilful master.

At the center of Aarhus the police of Eastern Jutland is preparing a criminal case. And while the police is collecting material and taking statements from witnesses, a parallel process of search is going on at other places in the city:

“We started in Nanea. This promising research institution. And now there is nothing called Nanea any longer. It was the merit of one man, that some really good science was produced. But it is also because of him, the house of cards collapses, because he has the flaws he has. Why didn't we react?”

It is Lise, who is brooding. Like Anja she participated in the journey from greatness to fall. Together with a third employee, Toke, they have accepted to tell their version of the shipwreck at the University of Aarhus and the route it took to get there.

They accept, because the story of Nanea like other good parables has a scope beyond itself and the funkis villa at Paludan Müllers Road in the north of Aarhus, where the enclave stayed.

At the same time, it is the story of an academic world, where competition for money, prestige and the right to do research is sharpened every year.

THE GOLDEN CHILD

Anja remembers her first day at Nanea. High and low, from secretary to senior-researcher, the group is standing in line and giving hugs to the new girl, when she starts a couple of years after the project has taken off. Lise remembers the atmosphere too. With jelly in her knees she stands up in front of her boss to point out some badly considered thoughts. But all the nervousness is in vain, for the arms are precisely as open, when it comes to new ideas as to new employees.

“You have to see opportunities!. It was Poul Thorsen's slogan, and I realize, that he created an alternative research environment. It built on a principle of everybody being of equal value and everybody having something to offer,” she says.

One thing is for sure, Nanea is unique from the beginning. The reason is two factors, that both give the unit a status most academic environments only can dream about.

First of all Nanea is gilted. The name of the project represents a research grant of eight million dollars. The gold vein is the American health institution CDC from Atlanta, and in the years coming further eight million dollars float to Nanea.

The other factor is the scale of the programme. Denmark is a country of registers. We sit on knowledge, not existing by the moneymen over there, and Poul Thorsen has access to that knowledge. With starting point in databases swelling with records of the lifestyles of pregnant women, the researchers at Nanea work to map out, how even tiny amounts of alcohol affects the intelligence of children later in life. Among other things they investigate the reasons of autism and spastic seizures on background of the numbers in other registers. The material as a whole is so vast, that several of the projects at Nanea are the most thorough of their kind in the world.

The size also results in the group outgrowing the frame at the mother-department for Epidemiology at the campus in Aarhus. The department gets it's own headquarter in a big square villa less than one kilometer away.

From the domicile at Paludan Müllers Road the unit continues to distance itself from the rest of the academic environment.

THE FAMILY

One characteristic feature distinguishes Nanea from the rest of the university and it is remarkable from the beginning. During the first years the employees live in a universe of gilt and spoiling. "We drive in an enormous Mercedes!" the slogan sounds, and so it is. Every time a researcher travels out in the country to collect data, it is on business class, says Anja.

Lise tells, that when the danes are visiting Atlanta, they are impressed, when a limousine drive up to the door of the hotel to take them to the meetings with CDC.

Delicious dinners, expensive brands of alcohol and stays at luxurious get-aways like the danish castles are on the programme, when the traffic goes the other way around and the moneymen from the USA are visiting Denmark.

At the same time the members of the group stick together in a way that is seldomly seen.

Summerparties, winterparties, Christmas celebrations, there is always an opportunity, and if nothing else, there are always the seminars. Anja calls them the energy-meetings. Toke and Lise remember their formal name off-site.

Here the employees go away for a couple of days. They have group sessions and hold lectures, where they share their work with each other. But first and foremost they share the vision of Nanea.

For her inner eyes Anja can still see her chief in front of her. The white screen is rolled out behind him. Models and strategies has been drawn with the colours of Nanea. At the powerpoint slides he is clicking his way through. Poul Thorsen is speaking. He is talking of the future, which belongs to Nanea. He talks about becoming the best research institution in the world, the most clever in it's area. And he talks about how Nanea gets there through joint efforts.

"We had to be committed. That was Poul Thorsen's word, and it functioned for a long time. I became committed," says Lise.

“All the time we had to define who we were. After all we were the naneans. Nanea was written on the letterbox of the house. We had our own logo and our own small things. When a Ph.d. took a degree, she got a Nanea-belt with a Nanea-buckle and small Nanea-things we could wear on the blouse” Anja remembers.

Nanea is a family. That is what they call themselves and the family has a chronicle. For although the group has grown out of Department of Epidemiology they are today two different entities. They are jealous of our means, while we are special, because we have the money. They are bureaucrats, while we are loose and large. In the middle of the chronicle stands Nanea’s father. Poul Thorsen has created the family, and his charisma binds the group together. “He could everything, and he was doing well for other people. He was shouting out loudly and laughing loudly, so we could hear him everywhere. There was a bit of hopping around after him, when he were in. Poul Thorsen – he was the guy we would like to dance with,” Anja explains.

THE ENTREPRENEURIAL UNIVERSITY

A new era has come to the danish universities, and Nanea is an example of that era. In the olden days people sat bent over their microscopes or piles of heavy books. Solid walls protected them against the humdrum of the world, while they collected the puzzle about the enigmas of nature. Often nobody knew how the new knowledge was going to be used. Jens Christian Skou gained the latest Nobel Prize to Denmark in 1997, but the physiologist published his first discoveries in 1957.

Today the Ebony Tower has collapsed. Claus Emmeche is chief of Center for Nature Philosophy and Science Studies at the Niels Bohr Institute. He is also among the front runners in the debate about, how the highest intellectual institutions of Denmark is going to be managed. Claus Emmeche does not know what has happened in the environment of Nanea. But he knows, what is required to get success in a new academic landscape, and here chiefs like Poul Thorsen easily distances researchers like Jens Christian Skou.

In December an international panel of experts published its evaluation of the new university law from 2003 and the joinings in 2007 and for that reason the debate about the universities is relevant right now.

According to Claus Emmeche exactly the second of the two events represent a milestone in the conditions for research in Denmark.

That year the politicians break the classical distribution of work between the different types of research. Until that moment the industry did research for it’s own money in order to earn more. The sector research gets it’s tasks and it’s means from the ministries. Only the universities are free to do research for it’s own purpose without losing financing. For the year 2007 is not only the year when Aarhus School of Business and the University of Aarhus becomes a unit. At the same time the universities are united with several institutions from the sector research.

“Now they have also taken over the challenges of the sector research institutions. They have to take care, that the ministries continue to think it worthwhile to finance their research. That means, that they use a great part of their working hours justifying themselves by continually making new contracts with purchasers of their research” explains Claus Emmeche.

“The entrepreneurial university” he names the new era. Here the clever scientist is not only the one, who with hard work peels layer upon layer off human ignorance. Here the winner becomes the scientist who knows how to appear in a dynamic way and who is good at networking. It is him who is good at branding himself and his research and who is eager to be entrepreneurial and good at scraping money together” says the lecturer.

Because the society wants to see a profit from the money invested and more so for every year. And while the basic financing of the fumbling basic research is diminished with two percent every new year, the risk is elevated that the negative sideeffects of the culture of competition seriously manifests itself in the academic environment of Denmark.

TAXFRAUD

At the Nanea unit decay begins to ravage. One day Anja receives a letter by post. It is from SKAT - the danish taxation authorities. In the letter it is stated, that SKAT has got an anonymous tip concerning among others Anja. She is one of several employees receiving public means, that are unjustified.

Anja is employed with supported salary (a publicly financed tool to reduce unemployment). More precisely Anja gets her supported salary and an amount, that Poul Thorsen pays on top of that every month, so that the end result for her is the correct salary for her full time employment. That is not legal. On the other hand it is a condition for her employment. The letters cause alarm. There are several persons, who are going to pay back a lot of money. They confront Poul Thorsen with this.

“It is really embarrassing for you” the chief says and hands Anja a letter, which has been dated backwards to the beginning of her employment. It says, that she is compensated for expenses concerning travels and equipment, and the intention is, that Anja handles this letter over to SKAT and escapes her bill.

The taxcase shows two things. The one is, that the economy halts so much at Nanea, that several employees are paid illegally. The other is, that it is hopeless to speak to the boss about the problem. Poul Thorsen gets “woolly in his mouth”, when he is pressed for an answer, explains Toke. Everybody notice, that the man on the floor has absolutely no insight into the economy of Nanea. The researchers cannot be informed, whether it is millions from CDC or means from other investors that pay their salaries. Nobody can be told, where the money disappears, and whether there is enough money to finish the different projects.

On the other hand the boss does nothing to diminish the expectations to the future.

“You can say a lot, but he was good at getting ideas, and he got more and more”, says Anja, who also explains, that the rethoric creates an elaborate spin, which distracts the attention from Poul Thorsen’s woolly answers and motivates everybody to continue.

Poul Thorsen tells his unit about clever new colleagues, who can start tomorrow, if only the naneans work hard and help getting hold of financing. He draws in the air and at his plates and tells about blood spots and other projects, that the research can be extended to, when the stream is turning the other way around.

“You must contribute to the pool for our common good. Then we will draw out the double amount next year,” Poul Thorsen encourages, and Lise states, that Nanea lives, as the chief directs.

“That is what you do in a family. You stretch out for one another.”

But the stream does not turn around at Nanea. In 2008 Poul Thorsen packs his trunk and moves to Atlanta. Toke experiences it, as if he is running away. The chief of it all leaves the researchers in the big house and in an economic swamp, that he alone is responsible for.

After new year Poul Thorsen gives notice of his employment. Nanea dies with its father, while the scandal accumulates around him.

SEDUCED

Danish Association of Masters (Dansk Magisterforening) is situated at Frederiksberg. Here many of the researchers in natural sciences are organized, and Jens Vraa-Jensen is a consultant for a great many of them. The fraud at the university of Aarhus does not surprise him. Economic dodge as for example Anja's creative packet of salary will normally be stopped by local shop stewards at the universities before Danish Association of Masters even hear about them. Nonetheless Jens Vraa-Andersen has heard of about 10 inquiries concerning illegal arrangements of salary support in recent years, and according to him the reason is obvious. It is “rather unique” at the danish labour market, that people employed in the world of universities have to go to work with their own salary in the rucksack, and that they are sacked, if the manoeuvre is unsuccessful. Last year the Natural Scientific Faculty at the University of Copenhagen said goodbye to 70 employees because of reductions. The reductions give a hint of the characteristics of the clever employee at the higher learning institutions in Denmark:

“The reductions only hit these people, who were financed by solid grants and who in principle ought to have the safest employment, while those who were on external projects were safe. Then some researchers begin to search for ways of improving their economics,” states Jens Vraa-Andersen.

That analysis is recognized at Center for Natural Philosophy and Science Studies. Here Claus Emmeche attacks the university system, that pay homage to the fundraiser and the entrepreneur in preference to the careful specialist. The sun shines on that person, who once has proved, that he can raise great grants, and who keep alive the flame of hope, that more will follow. He is allowed to be left in peace, and that is how the entrepreneurial university tempts “certain Stein Bagger-types to commit bungling and fraud.”

Nanea is dead. But the projects will be finished in new frames, and still one project is wriggling in the old unit. Ex-naneans have difficulties understanding, what really happened. For Toke the case is clear: He worked for an exceptional boss with an equally incomprehensible morality, but the chief was allowed to stretch out in a world, that made room for his tendencies.

“We have created a very competitive-minded system, where great amounts of money goes to individuals, who head big groups of scientists and in a way that system favours that kind of people. If you can sell yourself, you are like a fish in water in this system. If you even are unscrupulous and don't abstain from criminal acts, then you can at least for a while frisk about, and I don't believe this is the last case, we have seen.”

Poul Thorsen was the man of the new era. He “will have his movements of his arms and he was always cursing and swearing over the amount of bureaucracy,” says Lise. But his ideas were good, and therefore she didn’t conceive, that the old tub was rotten until it sank. Lise would like to save others for that surprise.

“For me it is a story of seduction. A case of propaganda. In the world of university they pay homage to punctiliousness of the research. We should always do everything in the same way, and we had to comply with the strongest scientific criterias. It takes a while before you realize, that someone plays the game in a completely different way.”

PS

The story of Nanea is build on conversations with Toke, Lise and Anja about how they respectively have experienced their time at Nanea.

The police of Eastern Jutland, the University of Aarhus and Danish Agency for Science, Technology and Innovation have contributed with background information. Toke, Lise and Anja are fictional names. Danish daily Information knows their right identity.

Information has contacted Poul Thorsen through his danish lawyer. Poul Thorsen did not want to co-operate about this article, but Jan Schneider maintains, that his client is innocent.

NANEA’S GREATNESS AND FALL

2000 Nanea is established with a grant of 7,8 million dollar from the American health institution Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The grant is administered by Danish Agency for Science, Technology and Innovation under the direction of Poul Thorsen.

2007 The project is prolonged by a new grant from CDC of 8,2 million dollar.

2008 Poul Thorsen moves to Atlanta, but is continuing as scientific and administrative chief of Nanea.

Winter 2008-2009 The University of Aarhus discovers, that the amounts of means Nanea has spent on research is not available. Poul Thorsen assures, that money is on it’s way from the USA and he can show declarations of grants as documentation.

March 2009 Poul Thorsen gives notice about his employment at the University of Aarhus. Nanea is closed down, while the projects continue under a new administration.

Spring 2009 The University of Aarhus discovers, that three letters about grants from CDC apparently are falsified, furthermore CDC does not acknowledge a paper about an amount missing concerning the first grant given to Nanea. Alltogether the false signatures comprise of an amount of almost two million dollars.

May 2009 Danish Agency for Science, Technology and Innovation gives notice to the police. The notice name no particular person.

Autumn 2009 The University of Aarhus discovers, that Poul Thorsen has kept double employment as a lecturer in Denmark and professor at Emory University in Atlanta, which the University of Aarhus has not approved of.

January 2010 The director of the University of Aarhus, Joergen Joergensen, renounces allegiances to Poul Thorsen in a statement to the collaborators of the Nanea-project. The statement also mentions the case of fraud.

February 2010 Danish daily Aarhus Stiftstidende writes about the case, and the other media follow after.

Marts 2010: The police of Eastern Jutland investigates the case with the intention to charge the keyperson of the case.

Source: <http://www.information.dk/227065>