

Helene Hesselager O'Barry: The following is a partial and rough translation of an article that appeared in a Faroese magazine in September 2013. As this is a translation of a translation, the text should not be quoted anywhere as a primary source.

«MANY FAROESE PEOPLE HAVE STOPPED EATING PILOT WHALE»

According to Pál Weihe, who is chief physician at the Department of Occupational and Public Health in the Faroese Hospital System, pilot whale is no longer fit for human consumption.

The Faroese people eat considerably less pilot whale than they did 30 years ago. Young women in particular refrain from eating pilot whale, and many Faroese children don't know what pilot whale tastes like. The fact that the Faroese have rejected the traditional diet of pilot whale is reflected in research conducted to determine the concentration of mercury in their blood: The (mercury) contamination of pregnant women, children and young people no longer exceeds what one would find in other countries.

The story behind the recommendations that have changed the dietary habits of the Faroese people is long and chaotic. The main character is medical doctor and researcher Pál Weihe who has been criticized for daring to say anything negative about the traditional pilot whale hunt, which has kept the Faroese alive for centuries. In the mid-80s, Weihe worked together with Philippe Grandjean who is Professor of Environmental Medicine. Their aim was to investigate if Faroese children had been harmed by their mothers' consumption of pilot whale. Weihe did not envision that the research would show any harmful effects, as the Faroese people have been eating pilot whale throughout thousands of years.

Blood tests were conducted on women from Leirvík. The women were between 20 and 50 years old. The concentration of mercury in their blood was much higher than that of people of other nations. Weihe then began testing samples of hair as well as umbilical cord blood (often called core blood) of more than 1000 women who gave birth in 1986 and 1987. He concluded that the children had between 10 and 20 percent more mercury in their blood compared to newborns of other countries. The amount of mercury was closely related to how much pilot whale the mothers had consumed. When the children were 6 years old, they were thoroughly examined. As it turned out, there was a connection between the amount of mercury found in the core blood and the children's development in several different areas. Among the areas mentioned are memory, language and alertness. The concentrations of PCB and DDT in the core blood were found to be 5-10 times higher than those found in other European countries. These toxins take longer to break down than mercury, and there is a suspicion that they may affect a person's central nerve system and sperm quality.

According to dietary recommendations issued in 1997, pregnant women should not consume pilot whale meat and blubber. Not everyone was happy about the warning against consumption, but it soon became apparent that the women adhered to the guidelines.

A 1982 study revealed that a Faroese person would consume an average of 12 grams of pilot whale meat and 7 grams of whale blubber a day. In 2000, Weihe once again asked pregnant women about their pilot whale intake. It turned out that they only consumed one tenth of what a Faroese person, including those who were pregnant, would have consumed 18 years ago.

According to Weihe, the women of the Faroe Islands are unique in that they take the health risks seriously in order to safeguard future generations. The research conducted on core blood showed that mothers of the Faroe Islands eat less pilot whale. In 1986, about 24 micrograms of mercury was found in the core blood. In 2000 that number was reduced to 12 micrograms. In 2009 that number was

