

Veterinarian of the Year 2019: Teija Korhonen

From a resilient forger of her own fate to an international expert

“Veterinary training provides an excellent foundation for finding very different paths in working life”, says **Teija Korhonen**, who was selected the 2019 Veterinarian of the Year. She is a Licentiate of Veterinary Medicine, an ECDC expert and a respected, independently thinking colleague who aspires to build up the veterinarian community and make an impact.

Text: Hanna Perkkiö ja Anna Parkkari
Photos unless otherwise stated:
Paul Quant

The office of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control ECDC is located in Stockholm. There are nearly 300 multinational employees with three Finnish veterinarians in the mix.

For Korhonen, those paths have led to Stockholm, to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control ECDC where she works as an expert for outbreak response in the Surveillance and Response Support Unit.

“EU level cooperation is important in this field as diseases do not respect national borders. The agency’s mandate is to identify and assess the risks of communicable diseases, conduct associated risk assessments, provide scientific evidence for national decision-making and facilitate cooperation between countries”, Korhonen says.

In her current job, the Veterinarian of the Year feels that she can take advantage

of all the experience she has gained in her career so far. However, the road has not been the easiest or the most straightforward.

A BLOW TO CAREER DREAMS

Korhonen’s childhood home was located in Kemi in Northern Finland, but her lineage is from Savonia Karelia in Eastern Finland. Korhonen spent all the summers at the small dairy farm of her aunt Maija in Tuupovaara, Eastern Finland. There she was also able to watch the work of the municipal veterinarian, which seemed exciting through a child’s eyes.

However, these occupational dreams were not solidified until upper secondary



Interest led to an international career

” Supervision of a mass vaccination campaign in Africa was not at all something I was prepared for. Every day I have learned a lot of new things, but of course the downside has been that every evening I have also felt quite inadequate. But I guess this is Africa and also easily the way things just happen in these kind of missions; you are supposed to do something but suddenly everything changes and you just try to follow the train. One has to tolerate living with feelings of imperfection. I can only try my best.”

Excerpt from a blog post by Korhonen on 24 April 2015 in Guinea.



Daily epidemic meeting, photo from March 2019. Korhonen on the left side of the table in the fuchsia outfit.

school. In 1992, her third attempt afforded a place at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, which back then was still the College of Veterinary Medicine.

The first five years of studies went well, and never once did Korhonen regret her choice of field. Then came the summer of bachelor internship, and nothing was the same after that.

“I was already tired in the spring as the studies had taken their toll. I ended up substituting for the municipal veterinarian in Kainuu, where there was supposed to be too little work to do even. Then, when I opened the reception on the first morning, the queue stretched out onto the pavement.”

It turned out that the local private clinic had been closed for July. Korhonen handled customers from two municipalities alone, being constantly on call for the first three weeks. There was hardly any time to sleep, and her weight dropped by seven kilos in two weeks. It was the mental side, however, that suffered the worst blow.

“In the autumn, I listened to how well everything had gone for my fellow students. I felt like crap. Like, was this what I had studied five years for. I thought that I was the problem”, Korhonen recalls.

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO COPE ALONE

The occupation had become a big part of her character, and when that part was shaken, everything collapsed. Korhonen devel-

oped depression and no longer wanted to graduate at all. It is only later that she has discovered that she was not the only one in this situation.

“Today, these issues are discussed more, and there has also been progress in working conditions. Hopefully no young people are left alone in the same way anymore.”

One turn for the better took place the following spring when Korhonen embarked on an *Erasmus* exchange in the Netherlands with a classmate. The first longer stay abroad was an encouraging experience.

The next turn came in the early 2000s when Korhonen moved in with her then-boyfriend in Geneva. The move meant an opportunity to postpone graduation while also taking a few years away from the studies and the whole field. Korhonen felt that this was a relief. “It was important to realise that I have value as a person whether I work as a veterinarian or not.”

The relationship ended, but instead of just returning home, there was a job offer, received through a friend, awaiting at the Seinäjoki branch of *Finnish Food Authority*. The post, which lasted for a couple of years, was followed by a stint as a consulting veterinarian at the Finnish Fur Breeders’ Association.

At that point, Korhonen was ready to start working on her final thesis again. A great support was University Lecturer **Mirja Ruohoniemi**, who was selected the Veterinarian of the Year in 2015. “She said

the encouraging words that burning out was not my fault. It helped me rid myself of the old burden. I graduated a lot later than my classmates, but I am no longer ashamed of it.”

INTEREST LED TO AN INTERNATIONAL CAREER

After graduating, Korhonen worked for a short time in a laboratory and at a slaughterhouse until, in 2009, she was employed by the National Institute for Health and Welfare to investigate food- and waterborne epidemics. She later continued working for the same employer for a year as an infectious disease consultant.

Korhonen had become interested in epidemiology years before on courses related to the subject. She had also had a desire to go back abroad all along. These things merged in 2011 when Korhonen was accepted into the ECDC’s two-year field epidemiology training programme in Marseille – once again on her third attempt.

“When working at the *National Institute For Health and Welfare*, I became familiar with a multidisciplinary approach as I got to work with people from different fields. I have always been interested in human diseases as well, and in Marseille, I was able to expand my expertise in that direction. Veterinary training provides a good basis for epidemiology and helps in understanding the importance of vaccinations and herd immunity, for example”, Korhonen says.

The training period in Marseille was demanding but rewarding, and Korhonen is one of only a few Finnish veterinarians who have completed it. She also improved her French language skills on the shores of the Mediterranean.

After completion, Korhonen did not have to twiddle her thumbs for long as the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control was looking for a fixed-term expert to Stockholm. Korhonen applied for the job at the last minute encouraged by her French boyfriend, and she is still following that path.

“I initially worked at the ECDC for almost four years through a staffing agency. In addition to administrative work, I conducted disease surveillance for food- and waterborne diseases and legionellosis and participated in conducting risk assessments for Ebola and Zika, for example. At the same time, I learned a lot about project management as well as the political decision-making associated with these issues.”

In the spring of 2015, Korhonen also gained experience in the field when she participated in the fight against Ebola in Guinea. According to Korhonen, Ebola is a good example of why the *One Health* mindset that has gained ground after the turn of the millennium is important.

“Many diseases are such that the fight against them requires cooperation between doctors, veterinarians, environmental health and other experts. Its importance is also very evident in my own work.”

AWARD AS AN ENCOURAGING EXAMPLE

Korhonen was finally able to say goodbye to temporary employment when she was appointed as an ECDC expert for outbreak response in the food- and waterborne diseases and zoonoses programme in October last year. The work focuses especially on the surveillance and statistical reporting of legionellosis cases related to tourism.

“However, my work at the agency allows me to keep up to date with all other infectious diseases as well, which is really interesting. I also like my work because of its international and multidisciplinary nature”, Korhonen says.

Her current post is for five years, but Korhonen would like to see herself working for the same employer also in ten years’ time.



“I now feel that this is my place in working life.” She says that she likes living in Stockholm.

If anything, the award-winner has learned to tolerate uncertainty during her career. That is why she was not discouraged even by the 11-month period of unemployment that preceded the current post. While unemployed, Korhonen directed her energy towards, for example, volunteering in the *Oikeus kuoonoon* (Right to a Snout) campaign of the Finnish Veterinary Association. The campaign calls on companies to not use brachycephalic pets in their marketing images.

“Teija Korhonen is an active and constructive person with influence both within the veterinarian community and outside it.

Among other things, she disseminates measured information to colleagues effectively on electronic forums for veterinarians. The creation of the *Oikeus kuoonoon* (Right to a Snout) campaign concerning the excessive breeding of dogs is largely due to the Veterinarian of the Year. With the 2019 *Veterinarian of the Year* award, the Finnish Veterinary Association wants to highlight the wide-ranging profession’s winding careers and skills that serve society. The association also wants to pay tribute to selfless work done for the veterinarian community. Korhonen is a key part of the Finnish veterinarian community from abroad, supporting us veterinarians in our work with both words and deeds”, says the association’s Chairperson **Päivi Lahti**.

The title of the Veterinarian of the Year was a complete surprise to Korhonen. She says that she is very overwhelmed, touched and happy about the recognition given by colleagues. “I hope that this acknowledgement and appreciation for a career path that is in many ways unusual will also give strength to others who experience difficulties in their careers and lives.”

The 2019 Veterinarian of the Year also hopes that her example might encourage colleagues to tackle problems and make

EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR DISEASE PREVENTION AND CONTROL, ECDC

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, or ECDC, is an EU agency established in 2005 that is based in Solna, Stockholm County. In Finnish, it is referred to as Euroopan tautienhäily- ja -valvontakeskus. The agency’s aim is to strengthen Europe’s defences against infectious diseases.

There are three Finnish veterinarians among the employees: **Johanna Takkinen**, **Taina Niskanen** and Teija Korhonen. The agency employs 12 other Finns and the total number of personnel is close to 300.

ECDC offers a two-year *learning by doing* training programme with two training paths: *Field Epidemiology* (EPIET) and *Public Health Microbiology* (EUPHEM).

Over the years, the training has been completed by 18 Finnish experts, of whom 15 attended the EPIET training and three the EUPHEM training.

The EPIET training has been completed by veterinarians **Katri Jalava**, **Johanna Takkinen**, **Merja Rantala** and **Ruska Rimhanen-Finne** and also Teija Korhonen.

The EU has a number of agencies located in member states, such as the European Medicines Agency EMA, European Food Safety Authority EFSA, European Chemicals Agency ECHA and the Consumers, Health, Agriculture and Food Executive Agency CHAFEA.

More information online:

ecdc.europa.eu and ec.europa.eu





"Korhonen is an active and constructive person with influence both within the veterinarian community and outside it. For example the creation of the *Oikeus kuonoon* (Right to a Snout) campaign concerning the excessive breeding of dogs is largely due to the Veterinarian of the Year, says the Chairperson Päivi Lahti."

unconventional choices in their careers. "At no point should you give up completely, but seek help where necessary, be open and walk boldly through new doors when they open."

Of the writers, Perkkiö is a freelance journalist and Parkkari the magazine's managing editor and an information officer for the Finnish Veterinary Association.

VETERINARIAN OF THE YEAR AWARD

The Veterinarian of the Year or Veterinary Deed of the Year award is distributed based on significant work done on behalf of veterinary medicine, veterinary care or the veterinarian community.

The award is part of the WVA's World Veterinary Day. The members of the Finnish Veterinary Association can submit a proposal on who should win the award to the association's Board. The award has been granted since 2001.

In 2019, the award was granted on 15 May.

The Veterinarian of the Year will address colleagues during the opening ceremony of the Annual Veterinary Congress on 11 December.

TEIJA KORHONEN

- Born in Kemi in 1969
- Agriculturalist, Kujala Agricultural College, Lahti, 1989
- Licentiate of Veterinary Medicine, Helsinki, 2007
- European Programme for Intervention Epidemiology Training (EPI-ET), 2014
- Qualified Veterinary Surgeon in Sweden, 2016

CAREER

- Seinäjoki branch of Evira (now the Finnish Food Authority), Veterinarian (disease diagnostics of production animals) 8/2004–9/2006
- Finnish Fur Breeders' Association, Consulting Veterinarian 11/2006–12/2007
- Seinäjoki branch of Evira (now the Finnish Food Authority), Veterinarian (disease diagnostics of production animals) 1/2008–8/2008
- SeiLab Laboratory Veterinarian 8/2008–12/2008
- Inspection Veterinarian for the Finnish Food Authority, Atria, Nurmo 2/2009–5/2009
- National Institute For Health and Welfare THL, Helsinki, investigation of epidemics 6/2009–12/2009 Helsinki branch of Evira (now the Finnish Food Authority), Senior Inspector (Facility Hygiene Department) 3/2010–8/2010
- National Institute For Health and Welfare THL, Helsinki, Infectious Disease Consultant 9/2010–9/2011
- European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, ECDC, Field Epidemiology training programme EPIET, Institut de Veille Sanitaire, Marseille, France 9/2011–9/2013
- ECDC, Scientific Expert (interim), Stockholm, Sweden 2/2014–10/2017
- ECDC, Expert Outbreak Response, Stockholm, Sweden 10/2018 ->

LEISURE

Sauna bathing, swimming, reading, the French language and sending postcards.

"A multifaceted career can lead to a dream job. Your coping is sometimes put to the test, but being positive and support from colleagues and friends are excellent pillars of support."

