

Bengt-Gunnar Westerling  
1931-2007



The leading Finnish scientist on reindeer digestion biology and seal pathology, Professor Bengt Westerling, died on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2007, in Helsinki, where he was born on 19<sup>th</sup> February 1931.

Westerling attended the Nya Svenska Läroverket-school and began his veterinary studies in Helsinki in 1949. Having afforded the highest degree then possible, he went to Stockholm to finish his studies. He qualified as a veterinary surgeon in Stockholm in 1959.

Back in Finland, Westerling worked as a veterinary surgeon in rural communities. He also opened a clinic where his wife Sonja took care of the reception work for decades.

At an early stage Westerling also took up for a university career. He was employed at the College of Veterinary Medicine in Helsinki as a teacher in anatomy and embryology in 1960-1978. Probably inspired by a co-worker who studied the bovine rumen epithelium in the Department of Anatomy, he directed his research at an animal that had not been studied before in this respect, the reindeer.

This made him a pioneer in Finnish reindeer research. His dissertation entitled “Rumen Ciliate Fauna of Semi-Domestic Reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus* L.) in Finland: Composition, Volume and Seasonal Variations”, and published in 1970, was the first veterinary medicine thesis dealing with the Finnish reindeer. His continuing research resulted in an associate professorship in digestion biology of ruminants in 1975. He made comparative studies of the digestive system of reindeer and other ruminants and published numerous articles on the physiology of ruminants and diseases of reindeer and wildlife. He was a demanding, respected teacher, and his activities in reindeer research inspired others to follow in his footsteps.

Westerling’s knowledge of reindeer and interest in reindeer husbandry was highly valued in the Nordic countries and used by the Nordic Council collaborative organization for Sami and reindeer husbandry, of which he was a member from 1970. When Nordic Council for Reindeer Research (NOR) was founded in 1980, he became co-chairman, and in 1985, he was elected chairman for five years. During this time, he made study tours to Alaska, Jakutsk and Murmansk.

In 1980-1982, Westerling worked as a chief inspector in the Veterinary Department of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. In 1982, he moved to the State Institute of Veterinary Medicine to work as a researcher in wild animal diseases until his retirement in 1996. At the institute he was appointed professor. He had many commissions on study, grant and medical committees.

During his last period of employment, Westerling concentrated in particular on rabies prevention and seal pathology in co-operation with the Finnish Game and Fisheries Research Institute (RKTL). For the latter purpose, he also was invited to join the seal research group of WWF Finland. It was a period when dead seals were collected in organized way, resulting finally in material on about 600 specimens. Several reports on this material have already been published, the total work to be published posthumously.

Westerling carried out seal autopsies not only in Helsinki but also in Åland, the Lake Saimaa area, at Lake Ladoga and in Estonia. During these trips, he always reserved time for bird watching and plant recognition, writing detailed protocols on the observations afterwards.

Westerling was the Secretary-General for the XIII Nordic Veterinary Congress in 1978. In scientific meetings many participants often gathered close to Bengt during evening discussions, because he could

speak English, Finnish and Swedish fluently and with quick humour. Proof of the last-mentioned language is his excellent contribution to a booklet of limericks, published after his death.

*Sven Nikander*  
*Olavi Stenman*  
Bengt's colleagues  
for decades