

New Swedish recommendations for age assessment of unaccompanied children

The National Board of Health and Welfare, Sweden has issued new recommendations for medical age assessment of unaccompanied minors applying for residence permit in Sweden. The ambition is to protect the interests and the rights of the child and to reduce the risk that the age of persons arriving is being incorrectly assessed.

In cases where there is uncertainty whether an unaccompanied child is under or over 18 years of age, – and when it is not obvious that the person is an adult – the Migration Board may propose a medical age assessment. For an individual that is considered to be an adult after such an assessment, this will have consequences for his or her housing, legal position in relation to authorities and for the right to a legal guardian. The EU Asylum Procedures Directive states that Member States may, as part of the asylum application procedure, use medical examinations to determine the age of unaccompanied children.

The role of the National Board of Health and Welfare in this area is to provide support and guidance to health care practitioners on appropriate methods of age assessment. The National Board of Health and Welfare considers none of the methods used today to be entirely reliable. Age assessments are based on psychosocial assessment and/or medical procedures such as X-ray examination of skeletal maturity and tooth development and on examinations by paediatricians.

- Today the risk of misjudgement is significant. At times methods that have no scientific basis, e.g. evaluation of appearance/visual inspection, are used. This is not satisfactory. The results of radiological examinations of skeletal maturity and tooth development always have a margin of error of between 1 and 4 years. The new and comprehensive recommendations are intended to help reduce the risk that unaccompanied children have their age determined to be over 18 years on an insufficient basis, say the Programme Officers **Katarina Munier** and **Elis Envall** at the National Board of Health and Welfare.

The Board considers it to be justified that society carries out medical age assessments when there is substantial uncertainty about the stated age and when it is not obvious that the person is an adult. Age assessments must then comply with standard requirements of impartiality, scientific quality and legal security.

The National Board of Health and Welfare hence recommends that:

1. A medical age assessment should as a routine begin with a clinical, paediatric examination of the young person and include medical history and an anthropometric assessment.
2. For a medical age assessment, radiographic examinations of the hand bones and teeth should be supplementary to the paediatric investigation.
3. The medical needs of the child identified during the age assessment should be monitored and addressed by means of referral to dental and health care for treatment.
4. The uncertainties that exist with the available radiographic methods should be expressed in a standardized manner using established protocols to communicate the results of medical age assessment based on radiographic examinations.
5. Assessment of the probability that an individual is over 18 years should be made at an acceptable level, which in a medical context means that a 95 per cent probability should be used.
6. In view of the uncertainties in available methods, the overall assessment of all investigative materials should be generous and be guided by the benefit of the doubt and with a view of the best for the child.
7. Protocols jointly developed by the Migration Board and the National Board of Health and Welfare should be used for referrals to medical/radiographic examination and for consultation responses.
8. Radiographic and paediatric examinations and assessments should preferably be conducted by radiologists, forensic dentists and paediatricians at a limited number of clinics around the country. A comprehensive medical assessment, based on these statements, should be performed by specialists at one or more institutions, authorities or equivalent, with which the Migration Board has concluded agreements.

The National Board of Health and Welfare intends to

- Follow and support research and methodological developments including methods of age assessment based on behavioural and psychosocial as well as other possible methods.
- Organise expert meetings with radiologists, forensic dentists, paediatricians, researchers and other experts in the field for discussions on the development and design of the protocols and on proposals for appropriate organization of medical and radiological examinations and the interpretation of statements.
- Develop protocols for referrals to medical and radiological examination as well as consultation responses and final statements on the medical age assessment.