

# Swedish Ambassador to U.S. Visits Miller School to Discuss Research Collaborations and Exchanges

Karin Ulrika Olofsdotter, Swedish diplomat and Ambassador to the United States, visited the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine campus on February 6. She was here to talk about future collaboration, to gather ideas for increasing the exchange of researchers and students between countries, and to tour the Center for Therapeutic Innovation laboratory.



From left, Cecilia Lif, Claes Wahlestedt, M.D., Ph.D., Karin Ulrika Olofsdotter, Per-Olof Loof and H. Peter Larsson, Ph.D.

“We are a small but research-intensive country. From an embassy’s perspective and the government’s perspective, it’s very important for us to increase the movement of talent,” Ambassador Olofsdotter said. “How do we get Swedes to come out here to learn more, and how do we get Americans to come to us and do research?”

Along with colleague Cecilia Lif, Counselor at the Embassy of Sweden in Washington, D.C. and Per-Olof Loof, Honorary Consul of Sweden in the U.S. for Florida, based in Fort Lauderdale, the Ambassador met with several Swedish-born faculty from the Miller School and the University of Miami Patti and Allan Herbert Business School.

The Ambassador learned about the focus of research from Claes Wahlestedt, M.D., Ph.D., Eva Widerstrom-Noga, D.D.S., Ph.D., and H. Peter Larsson, Ph.D. She also asked each of them for advice on how to increase U.S.-Sweden cooperation on health and medical research.

“Research has really increased a lot in the last few years here at the University of Miami. The NIH funding has increased every year,” said Dr. Wahlestedt, Leonard M. Miller Professor and associate dean for therapeutic innovation at the Miller School, who hosted the event.

An academic medical center like University of Miami is an ideal setting, added Dr. Wahlestedt, who is also vice chair for research in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences. “We do translational research – and you need to be close to clinical experts.” He explained his research on the human genome and various diseases, including Alzheimer’s, a common condition lacking effective treatment options.



From left, Claude-Henry Volmar, Ph.D., Claes Wahlestedt, M.D., Ph.D., and Ines Lohse, Ph.D.

Dr. Widerstrom-Noga completed her Ph.D. education in Sweden, moved to Miami and was invited to start a pain program at The Miami Project to Cure Paralysis.

“There was some resistance at first. ‘Why would you study pain in spinal cord injury?’ some asked, assuming paralyzed people do not experience pain.

“I didn’t believe that – I figured they had some sort of neuropathic pain.” When she asked patients, “everyone I spoke to had pain ... but did not mention it.” Addressing this unmet need is one focus of the research by Dr. Widerstrom-Noga, who is a professor of neurological surgery at the Miller School.

In terms of other Swedish-born researchers, “I pretty much know all the people in the world who do this kind of work,”

she said. “Some come here from Karolinska Institutet [in Solna, Sweden], but we don’t have a formal exchange program.”

“For me, something like that would be awesome,” Dr. Widerstrom-Noga told the Ambassador.

Also Swedish born, Dr. Larsson got his Ph.D. at University of California in Berkeley. His research focuses on developing effective medications to help prevent sudden cardiac death. The alternative, placement of an implantable cardioverter defibrillator, can be “pretty expensive and invasive,” he said.

Approximately one person in 2,000 has Long QT Syndrome, a major cause of sudden cardiac death. Many people remain asymptomatic, and it is “mostly children and teenagers who die,” said Dr. Larsson, who is professor and vice chair of research in the Department of Physiology and Biophysics at the Miller School.



From left, Per-Olof Loof, Cecilia Lif and Karin Ulrika Olofsdotter.

The Larsson lab has identified and filed a patent on a

compound-based on fish oil. Dr. Larsson foresees the day when people at risk of sudden cardiac death can take a daily preventive medication, analogous to taking low-dose aspirin to prevent a heart attack.

“We would love to have Swedish Ph.D. students here,” Dr. Larsson told the Ambassador. “For some reason we don’t have any applicants from Sweden.”

Following the discussion, Therapeutic Innovation Laboratory researchers Claude-Henry Volmar, Ph.D., and Ines Lohse, Ph.D., led the Swedish delegation on a tour. They explained their work on pancreatic cancer cell lines, how they are repurposing existing drugs to treat this aggressive malignancy, and the latest advances in Alzheimer’s disease in this setting, also known as the Wahlestedt Laboratory.

Ambassador Olofsdotter, in her official capacity, also promoted Sweden. Conducting research at a university in a different country can offer career advantages, for example. “To advance science and research, you really need new contacts and new collaborations.”

In addition, the country is very family friendly, for example, with “excellent day care included in the taxes,” so it is possible to work and have a family, she said.

The workplace culture in Sweden is very egalitarian, she added, so input, opportunities and responsibilities are shared among all employees. “Many attest when they come to Sweden that they like the non-hierarchical structure,” Ambassador Olofsdotter said.

The quality of life is “very high,” she added, with Sweden ranking No. 7 on the [World Happiness Report in 2019](#) of the happiest countries, for example. “We are top 10 in everything, and that does not mean we do not have challenges, because we do, but compared to others, it is very good.” And in 2019, Sweden placed No. 1 for the second year in a row in the annual rankings of countries’ reputations as reported by the [Reputation Institute](#), a reputation measurement and management services firm.

“We would love to have all Americans come to Sweden, live it, and see for yourself,” she said.