PhD title:
Long-term psychological consequences of early parental loss

English summary:

Introduction
Early loss of a parent is considered to be one of the most stressful and traumatic life events that a child or young adult can experience. Severe psychological problems like depression is only seen in a minority immediately after the loss, but studies suggest that more may experience problems later in life. Preventing such long-term effects would be beneficial. However, due to methodological limitations, previous studies have not been able to completely indentify those children or young adults who are particularly vulnerable after the loss of a parent. Furthermore, there are no clinical guidelines as to when and how support of bereaved children should be undertaken. Several private organizations have developed grief counseling, but there is limited knowledge of who is attending grief counseling and how their mental health is later in life.

Aim
The aim of this thesis is to investigate the association between the loss of a parent as child or young adult (age 0 – 30 years) and depression later in life. Furthermore, the aim of the study is to investigate the mental health in bereaved young adults, who have participated in grief counseling. The overall aim was addressed through the following three studies:
Study I: To investigate the association between early parental death and later hospitalization for depression later in life and whether this association is affected by factors such as sex, age at loss, cause of death and sex of deceased parent.
Study II: To investigate the association between early parental death and use of antidepressants and whether this association is affected by factors such as age at loss, cause of death, sex of deceased parent and time since loss.
Study III: To investigate differences in self-reported mental health in young adults according to whether they have lost a parent and to whether they have participated in grief counseling.

Method
Nationwide register-based cohort designs were used to investigate associations between early parental death and hospitalization for depression (n=1 225 660) and use of antidepressants (n=1 120 452) in persons born in Denmark between 1970 and 1990. Mental health status according to early parental death and participation in grief counseling was investigated using a cross sectional design, including questionnaire data and register based data on 2467 young adults, who were identified through private counseling organizations and a nationwide register.

Results
The register based cohort studies show that bereaved children and young adults have an increased risk of being hospitalized for depression and for use of antidepressants. This association was
strongest for the youngest children and teenagers, for those who had lost a parent to suicide, and for females who had lost their mother.

The cross sectional study shows that bereaved young adults report more depressive symptoms and a lower mental health related quality of life compared to young adults who have not lost a parent. Those who have participated in grief counseling report more depressive symptoms and more symptoms of prolonged grief disorder compared to those who have not participated in grief counseling.

**Conclusion**

The studies presented in this thesis suggest, that a small minority of those who lose a parent as a child or young adult, may develop serious psychological problems later in life. Furthermore, those young adults who have participated in grief counseling following the loss of a parent report worse mental health than those who have not participated. The thesis therefore highlights the need for further preventive and therapeutic initiatives to support these children and young adults. Clinical guidelines for bereaved children and young adults, and systematic screening for depression may help to plan individualized family counseling and to identify particularly vulnerable families. Finally, there is need for further development and testing of interventions that are offered to bereaved children and young adults.