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ASPI honors Norwegian patient advocate and urologist for landmark work on safer prostate biopsies

Agnes Marie Bjørge Gulbrandsen and Professor Emeritus Truls E. Bjerklund Johansen receive 2026 Thráinn Thorvaldsson Patient Advocacy Award

OSLO, Norway, June 17, 2026 — Active Surveillance Patients International (ASPI), a nonprofit patient education and advocacy organization, has named Agnes Marie Bjørge Gulbrandsen and Professor Emeritus Truls E. Bjerklund Johansen, MD, PhD, recipients of the 2026 Thráinn Thorvaldsson Patient Advocacy Award for their work helping accelerate the shift from transrectal to transperineal prostate biopsy in Norway and beyond.

The award recognizes an extraordinary collaboration born from personal tragedy. Gulbrandsen's father, Roar, died in 2018 following complications after a routine transrectal prostate biopsy. In the years that followed, Gulbrandsen pursued answers and ultimately worked with Bjerklund Johansen, a leading urologist at Oslo University Hospital, to draw public attention to the risks of biopsy-related infection and sepsis.

Their advocacy helped accelerate Norway's move toward transperineal prostate biopsy, an approach that avoids the rectum and sharply reduces the risk of infection.

"Agnes and Truls represent the very best of what patient advocacy can accomplish," said Mark Lichty, board chair and co-founder of ASPI. "A daughter's grief became a movement. Their work helped bring safer biopsy practices to men in Norway and helped raise international awareness of a preventable source of harm."

A tragedy that became a movement

In February 2018, Gulbrandsen's father, Roar, died days after undergoing a routine transrectal prostate biopsy. What appeared to be a standard procedure led to devastating complications.

Refusing to accept dismissive answers, Gulbrandsen continued asking questions. She eventually partnered with Bjerklund Johansen, who helped confirm the likely role of biopsy-related infection and worked with her to bring the issue into public view.

Together, they helped spark a national conversation in Norway about the risks of transrectal biopsy and the safer alternative of transperineal biopsy.

“It means more to me than words can fully express to be selected for the Thráinn Thorvaldsson Award for Advocacy,” Gulbrandsen said. “The work around transperineal biopsies has been driven by a commitment to improving patient safety and dignity, and to know that this effort is recognized by ASPI is deeply meaningful.”

She added that the recognition carries deep personal meaning.

“My father died following complications from the traditional biopsy procedure,” she said. “Experiencing that loss has shaped my engagement, and seeing meaningful procedural change take place in Norway — and knowing that Truls has been instrumental in helping advance safer practice — makes this acknowledgment especially powerful.”

Patient advocacy and physician leadership

Bjerklund Johansen said the award reflects the power of patients and physicians working together.

“Receiving the Thráinn Thorvaldsson Patient Advocacy Award fills us with great joy,” he said. “This recognition means so much — not only for the work itself, but for what it represents: the power of a patient and a physician working together toward a common goal of saving lives.”

He credited Gulbrandsen’s determination with helping make the issue impossible to ignore.

“Agnes brought a daughter’s love and an unstoppable determination to this cause, and together we sparked a conversation that changed practice in Norway and across Europe, and, we hope, is beginning to change practice around the world,” Bjerklund Johansen said. “That men are safer today because of this work is the greatest reward of all. We are deeply grateful to ASPI for this honor.”

Howard Wolinsky, chair of the ASPI Awards Committee and co-founder of ASPI, said the award recognizes advocacy with real-world impact.

“Agnes is a model for all advocates,” Wolinsky said. “She accomplished a great deal in the name of her late father, and she should be proud of what she achieved alongside Truls. Together, they changed how prostate biopsies are performed in Norway and helped push medicine toward safer practice.”

Why biopsy approach matters

A prostate biopsy is a procedure in which small tissue samples are removed from the prostate to test for cancer. For decades, many biopsies were performed through the rectum. In a transrectal biopsy, the biopsy needle passes through the rectal wall to reach the prostate, creating a risk that bacteria can enter the prostate or bloodstream.

In a transperineal biopsy, the needle enters through the perineum, the skin between the scrotum and anus, avoiding the rectal wall. Because this route avoids the bacteria-rich rectum, it greatly reduces the risk of serious infection.

The issue has become increasingly important as concerns have grown about antibiotic resistance and preventable biopsy-related infections. In 2021, the European Association of Urology updated its guidelines to designate the transperineal biopsy as the preferred approach for prostate cancer diagnosis.

The American Urological Association has not made the same preferred-route designation, and the topic remains a focus of discussion and debate in the United States.

About the Thráinn Thorvaldsson Patient Advocacy Award

The Thráinn Thorvaldsson Patient Advocacy Award is named for ASPI co-founder Thráinn Thorvaldsson, a pioneering advocate for men on Active Surveillance. Thorvaldsson helped build ASPI from the ground up and worked to ensure that men with low-risk prostate cancer had access to reliable information, support, and community.

The award honors individuals whose advocacy has made a meaningful difference for prostate cancer patients and their families.

Previous recipients include Thráinn Thorvaldsson, E. Michael “Mike” Scott of Prostate Cancer International, and Howard Wolinsky, ASPI co-founder, medical journalist, and editor of *The Active Surveillor*.

About Active Surveillance Patients International

Active Surveillance Patients International is a nonprofit organization dedicated to educating, supporting, and advocating for men with low-risk prostate cancer who are on or considering Active Surveillance, along with their families. Through free tools, webinars, community support, and patient resources — including its plain-language guide, *The Pathway: Your Guide to Active Surveillance* — ASPI helps patients understand their options, make informed decisions, and connect with evidence-based information. For more information, visit aspatients.org.

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