

Alcohol takes its toll on Europe's youth

Whether it is drinks or drugs — getting high seems to be increasingly popular among European teenagers. In most European countries, today's 16-year-olds consume more alcohol, cannabis and other drugs than ever. And they're paying a price. Alcohol is to blame for one in four deaths of young European men aged 15 to 29. These bleak findings were presented in late February at the European Ministerial Conference on Young People and Alcohol in Stockholm, where WHO and the Swedish government had convened European health ministers, other high-ranking decision-makers and young citizens from 51 European countries to discuss the impact of alcohol and drugs on the health of Europe's coming generations — and to sketch out a region-wide action plan to keep them "safe and dry."

Concerted measures are necessary, says Dr Cees Goos, the coordinator of WHO's Alcohol, Drugs and Tobacco Unit in Copenhagen, because "the alcohol industry is out to aggressively infiltrate their future market. They're sponsoring fun events, they put their banners on web pages, they're trying everything to get at young people."

And they seem to be getting results, if the findings of the 1999 European School Survey Project on Alcohol and other Drugs (ESPAD), which were presented in Stockholm, are anything to go by. Conducted by the Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs (CAN), the ESPAD project collects data by questionnaire survey on alcohol, tobacco and drug use among 15–16-year-old high school students in 30 European countries. Altogether, nearly 100 000 students participated in the 1999 survey.

According to the report, binge drinking, that is, having five or more drinks in a row, has increased by 21% to 55% in almost half of the countries; heading the list is Slovenia, where the number of binge drinkers has more than tripled. As in 1995, when the first ESPAD was conducted, alcohol use among youngsters is still most prevalent in Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom, where between 36% and 51% of the teenagers had imbibed alcohol 20 times or more within the last 12 months. Not surprisingly the frequency of drunkenness has also increased. Among the countries with the highest alcohol intoxication rates,

the proportion of 16-year-olds who were drunk three times or more within the last 30 days rose from 21% to 30% in Denmark and from 15% to 24% in Ireland, while rates in Finland and the United Kingdom remained largely unchanged at about 18% and 24%. What's more, illicit drug use also rose by 20–400% in the 30 countries as a whole. The largest increases occurred in central and eastern Europe, such as in Lithuania, where illicit drug use rose about fivefold. But the highest prevalence rate, more than 30%, is still found in western European countries, such as the UK and Ireland. With respect to cannabis, for instance — by far the commonest illicit drug consumed — the Czech Republic is now on a par with as the UK's and France's 35% of lifetime users, closely followed by Ireland, with 32%.

For Dr Björn Hibell, CAN director and coordinator of the survey, the numbers indicate that the situation has deteriorated since 1995. "Overall, young people simply consume more drugs today," he says. And WHO's Goos adds, "There seems to be a change in the way young people drink. Binge drinking is becoming more and more popular. And that's not particularly good for public health, to put it mildly, because there are strong links between high-risk drinking like binge drinking, violence, unsafe sexual behaviour, and traffic and other accidents."

Data also presented at the meeting from the ongoing Global Burden of Disease 2000 Study by Jürgen Rehm of the Addiction Research Institute in Zürich, Switzerland, illustrate just how strong the links really are. Altogether, more than 57 000, or one in four, Europeans between the ages of 15 to 29 died in 1999 from causes related to alcohol use, such as transport accidents, poisonings, self-inflicted injuries and homicide. In parts of eastern Europe the figure is even as high as one in three young men. (A similar study in the US, published in the March issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*, found motor vehicle crashes to be the leading cause of death for 15 to 20-year old Americans — and more than a quarter of them had been drinking beforehand.)

Yet another study, the European Comparative Alcohol Study (ECAS), found that "more is worse," that is, the higher a country's per capita alcohol consumption, the higher its alcohol-related mortality rate. And in a further blow to alcohol's already

tainted reputation the ECAS study could not find any evidence that moderate alcohol consumption protects from heart disease. "There are a lot of myths about the positive effects of wine drinking," says Goos. "But based on these data there's no way that you could recommend drinking even low amounts of alcohol to prevent heart disease." ■

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In Brief

WHO airline meeting sparks deep thrombosis research

A mid-March meeting of experts and airline representatives convened by the WHO concluded that "a link probably exists between air travel and deep vein thrombosis" but that evidence is lacking to determine the magnitude of the problem. The meeting participants decided to launch three large-scale studies to quantify the link, to identify precipitating factors and to examine possible preventive measures. The studies will be coordinated by the WHO and the International Civil Aviation Organization. ■

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New anti-malarial drug should outsmart parasite resistance

The WHO and the pharmaceutical firm GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) announced in March that they had linked up to develop a new antimalarial combination drug, called LAPDAP. The drug, which is given orally, combines two existing antimalarial compounds, chlorproguanil and dapsone, and will be offered to public health programmes at a preferential price. Clinical trials in Africa have shown the drug to be effective in uncomplicated malaria resistant to other standard antimalarials. To further protect the new combination drug from parasite resistance, the partnership plans eventually to equip it with a third antimalarial drug, artemisinin. ■

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