

# Searching together for answers to the problem of designer drugs and cocaine

**National conference.** Consumption of cocaine and «designer» drugs is a problem for users and their families, prevention and health workers and the public at large. In early June 2004, the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health (SFOPH) will be hosting a national conference in Berne on designer drugs and cocaine with the aim of providing government representatives and professionals from research and practice with some idea of the extent of the problem and of discussing models for solving it.



In Switzerland, cocaine and designer drugs in general are considerably more widespread than heroin, for example. Problematic consumption of cocaine, amphetamines and other stimulants is causing the drug treatment agencies a lot of difficulties. The arrival of the «new drugs» on the scene (and amphetamines and their derivatives in particular) is causing new health problems and creating new risks in the population at large. At the same time, rapidly changing use patterns and trends (such as increasing multiple drug use and increasing consumption by adolescents) are presenting a new challenge for health policy in Switzerland.

Media reports and information from the field about the increase in consumption of cocaine and designer drugs have unsettled both the general public and the institutions providing drug treatment services.

We can roughly distinguish between two types of consumer: those who use cocaine regularly and intravenously (generally as an accompaniment to heroin), and those who snort cocaine and mostly use it only occasionally. The second group rarely uses only cocaine; in recreational contexts it is often taken in conjunction with other drugs such as tobacco, alcohol, cannabis and other stimulants. The trend towards increasing use of cocaine and stimulants (ecstasy, other amphetamines and similar) among young people aged between 15 and 22 is striking. The data currently available make it nearly impossible to assess whether and to what extent recreational consumption in this age group is likely to become a problem.

Perceptions of the gravity of the problem vary as widely as the target groups. But it is already clear that action needs to be taken specifically in terms of youth protection and prevention, therapy, harm reduction, monitoring and research (into target group-specific prevention and

the long-term effects of drugs, for example).

Designer drugs are particularly widespread in the techno scene, but they are also common in nightclubs and bars. New derivatives appear faster than existing ones can be included in the classifications appended to the Swiss Narcotics Act. The drugs used vary widely depending on the venue, region and scene. Some drug treatment organizations have already started expanding their services to meet the specific needs of consumers, but by and large there is no systematic overview or assessment of the problems and there are no practicable approaches to solving them.

## The cocaine problem

The true extent of cocaine use and the associated problems in Switzerland is still not really known. From the point of view of health policy, the problems tend to be focused on the following specific groups:

- Dependent opiate users who also use cocaine;
- Regular, heavy users of cocaine;
- Polydrug users who combine cocaine with other substances such as alcohol, tobacco, cannabis etc.;
- Cocaine users with pre-existing psychiatric problems and individuals with increased susceptibility to emotional problems.

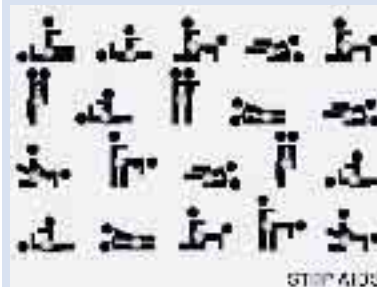
In general, individuals who use cocaine intravenously are at higher risk, as are those who engage in high-risk or abusive consumption of a number of substances including cocaine.

Cocaine is a drug which, when used outside the medical setting (as a local anaesthetic) is associated with risks, because:

- Cocaine is highly addictive;
- Combined use of cocaine and other drugs increases the health risks associated with cocaine (particularly cardiovascular problems), which

*Continued on page 2*

## STOP AIDS



**Prevention messages that are funny and direct** STOP AIDS campaigns are well known for getting the message across very clearly and with a smile. For the first time, the posters show pictograms of couples in every conceivable sexual position. It goes without saying that a condom is part of the fun every time.

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## Cannabis



**Support for schools** More than one third of young people in the 16 to 20 age group in Switzerland use cannabis. If the habit becomes problematic, school is often the first place it shows up. The SFOPH has sent guidelines to all senior secondary schools to make prevention and early detection easier.

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# Illicit trade in medicines over the Internet

**Medicines over the Internet.** The 47th Session of the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs held in Vienna in mid-March approved a resolution drawn up jointly by Switzerland and the USA on the illicit Internet trade in medicines. The resolution requires member states to clamp down on the sale of internationally controlled substances over the Internet. The Commission stresses the need to find a generally binding solution to regulate the Internet trade in medicines.



Internet trafficking in narcotics and psychotropic substances (sleep-inducing agents, tranquilizers, stimulants, etc.) has been growing rapidly

in the last few years. Because of their addiction potential these substances are dispensed only on prescription in almost all countries and treatment

with them requires medical supervision. Yet most of them can be obtained over the Internet – despite provisions to the contrary in UN conventions.

The conventions lay down that each individual instance of cross-border trade in these substances requires official authorization. While most countries have introduced this ruling for producers and wholesalers, the medicines control agencies in many of them do not monitor the trade at the private individual level. Because the substances are often produced and sold illegally, their quality cannot be controlled by the authorities. As a result, they often contain substances that are wrongly labelled, counterfeit, past their shelf-life or excessively expensive. Very few of them are supplied with a data sheet in the purchaser's language.

The Swiss Parliament clamped down on the import of such medicines by private individuals in the narcotics legislation years ago. When such items are identified at customs, they are confiscated and the would-be purchaser risks prosecution for infringement of the law as well as having to pay substantial sums to cover the cost of confiscation and destruction of the material.

Last year, the massive worldwide increase in the Internet trade in these

medicines prompted Switzerland to submit the problem to the UN's International Narcotics Control Board (INCB). The INCB dedicated an entire chapter to the problem in its 2003 Annual Report and called on all countries to take steps to curb this Internet trade, banned as it is in UN conventions.

A resolution drawn up jointly by Switzerland and the USA was approved by the Commission on Narcotic Drugs at its Forty-Seventh Session held in Vienna in mid-March. The Swiss Delegation consisted of representatives from the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health and the Swiss Agency for Therapeutic Products, Swissmedic.

Contact: Monique Helfer,  
Communication Service, Swissmedic,  
tel. +41 31 322 02 76

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- may lead to fatal complications;
- Using cocaine increases the probability of various somatic, psychiatric and social problems;
- In women, the use of addictive substances, particularly cocaine, increases the risks associated with pregnancy and giving birth;
- Using cocaine can lead to delusions in the short term; long-term use increases the risk of more lasting psychotic states in susceptible individuals;
- Using cocaine leads to heightened self-esteem and poor judgement in personal and professional contexts, resulting in human suffering and great financial cost;
- Substance abuse makes cocaine users particularly susceptible to behaviour that breaches accepted standards or the law;
- Using cocaine can put a considerable mental strain on the user, which can manifest as increased disregard for the individual's environment. This is particularly true of individuals who experience violence and disregard for the well-being of others in the drug-taking scene;
- Cocaine abuse can lead to increased healthcare costs and serious damage in the user's professional and family environments.

## Designer drugs in Switzerland

The term «designer drugs» is often used synonymously with «party drugs». If the term «party drugs» is

taken to include all substances consumed in the party setting and whose consumption is subject to certain trends, it covers cannabis, designer drugs, hallucinogenic drugs and stimulants such as amphetamines and cocaine. However, if the definition is widened to include all the substances consumed by people at parties, then it also covers alcohol and tobacco, two legal substances whose use is still more widespread than that of illegal drugs.

Used as an umbrella term, designer drugs in the narrower sense refers to a number of substances which pose widely varying health risks and can cause very different problems in the user's social environment.

As with cocaine, the full extent of designer drug use is still not known. Consumption of designer drugs and of stimulants such as amphetamines and cocaine in particular is a problem in terms of public order, youth protection and health policy. From the point of view of health policy, most of the problems associated with using designer drugs are focused on individuals with a regular, high level of consumption; on polydrug users who mix one or more designer drugs with other substances such as alcohol, tobacco, cannabis etc.; on young people and entry-level users; and on users with psychiatric problems and those susceptible to emotional disorders.

## Applying the «fourfold» strategy

The SFOPH intends to take the Federal Government's proven fourfold strategy as the basis for its efforts to tackle consumption of both cocaine and designer drugs. Its recommended preventive measures include information, target group-specific prevention activities and pill testing, with a special focus on the problem of polydrug use. In terms of therapy it is keen to encourage innovative and interdisciplinary forms of intervention and treatment. Harm reduction should draw on existing resources, interventions will be networked, injecting/inhalation rooms for cocaine users will be set up, and measures to improve health protection in clubs will be promoted. The health authorities' emphasis in law enforcement will be on collaboration and exchange. Research and evaluation should focus on epidemiology, neurobiology, pharmacology and lifestyle research, provision of services, treatment, criminological investigation of distribution networks and evaluation of therapies and harm-reduction activities. In the case of cocaine users, particular attention will be paid to concurrent medical disorders and «dual diagnosis» patients. The health authorities would also like to put in place ongoing training measures (transfer of expertise between research and the practical setting), an early warning system and drug monitoring.

Contact: Manuela Schmundt, SFOPH, Swiss Platform for Coordination and Services in the Domain of Substance Abuse (KDS), CH-3003 Berne, tel. +41 31 322 58 00, manuela.schmundt@bag.admin.ch

## National conference

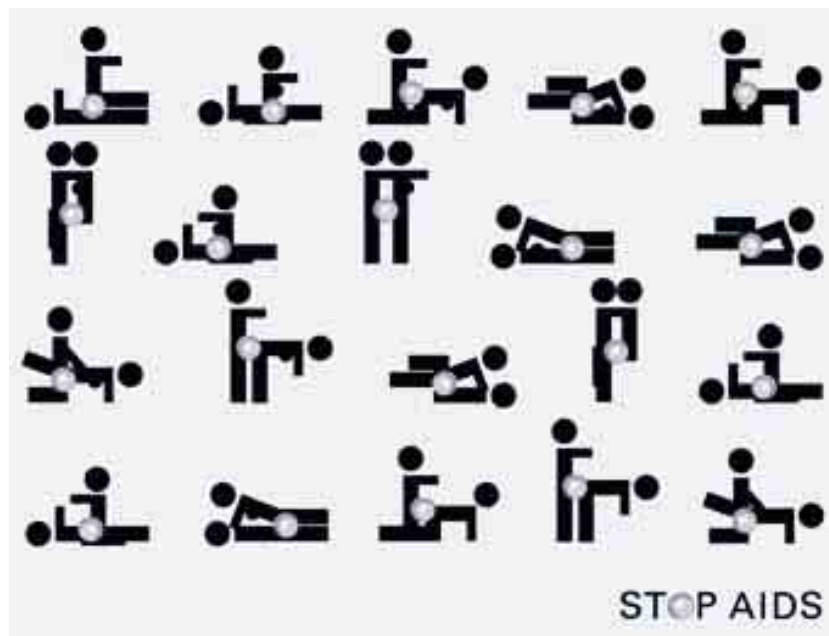
The National Conference on Designer Drugs and Cocaine hosted by the SFOPH on 3 and 4 June 2004 at the Kursaal in Berne will welcome 160 delegates from public administration, addiction prevention, the drug treatment services and addiction medicine, research, the police and the judicial system (the number is limited and the conference is already booked out) and will offer a series of presentations with audience participation by speakers from Switzerland, the Netherlands and Austria. Ten workshops will allow smaller groups to consider in depth various aspects of designer-drug and cocaine use ranging from pill testing, lifestyle and migration-specific prevention to co-morbidity and early warning systems. The conference will conclude with a podium discussion with politicians and professionals working in the field. The conference has been conceived as a platform for open discussion and aims to facilitate a practical and solution-oriented approach to developing strategies and measures for dealing with the problems arising from the use of designer drugs and cocaine.

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# Simple, amusing and right to the point – even without words

**STOP AIDS campaign 2004.** The STOP AIDS 2004 campaign kicks off with pictograms illustrating love games with a condom. The new posters designed to beat AIDS were developed in collaboration with the Swiss Aids Federation and take a very direct, no-nonsense approach to getting their message across. Black text on a yellow background aims to remind the public and, more particularly, customers of the sex trade, to practice safer sex. The posters were launched on 19 April and will be on display until the end of May 2004.



The pictograms are a «first» in the history of the STOP AIDS campaign. Once again, the campaign is taking a playful approach to reminding people that anyone can protect him or herself against the HI virus during sexual encounters. Body language makes words superfluous; what is important is the gesture that provides protection. No matter how and with whom, a condom is vital.

Unfortunately, using condoms is still not a matter of course in the sex trade, and this is why the posters displayed in the red-light districts of Switzerland's cities directly target the clients with the aim of encouraging them to use condoms routinely. A number of Swiss nightclubs are also displaying posters to inform their guests. There has been a worrying expansion of the sex market in some regions. This means downward pressure on prices and in some cases un-

protected sex simply to undercut the competition. This in turn increases the risk of infection in an already problematic environment.

## Condoms protect

The condom is and will remain the only effective way of providing protection during high-risk sexual encounters. Scientific studies have shown clearly that the protection conferred by condoms prevents the transmission of HIV and other sexually transmissible infections. One study followed 256 couples over a 20-month period; each couple was made up of one HIV-positive and one HIV-negative partner. The study demonstrated that condoms, used correctly, make the transmission of disease impossible (Center for Communication Programs, USA, 1999).

When used correctly, Swiss and other European condoms bearing the

labels CE (required in Switzerland), MD (required in Europe) and/or «ok» (quality label) guarantee the highest standard.

## Plain talking and some laughs

The ideas for posters are often tested before a national campaign is launched. A pre-test was carried out with 180 people in the German- and French-speaking parts of Switzerland before the latest phase of the STOP AIDS campaign hit the streets. It showed that the STOP AIDS campaign is meeting with a very high level of acceptance among respondents and is felt to be vital. People insist that STOP AIDS must use plain language; the campaign more or less has the public's permission and a duty to tell it like it is. Plain talking is particularly well received when it is delivered with humour and makes people smile.

Particular attention was paid to establishing how people respond to the



STOP AIDS: «Stand firm and act responsibly».

use of pictograms to represent sexual features. Although reactions to the explicit version – with recognizable penis and breasts – were largely positive, the posters do not feature primary sexual characteristics other than stylized breasts. The pre-test also showed that using an abstract version of the human body by reducing it to a geometric form is precisely what makes the campaign completely unobjectionable. The comment made by a 45-year-old housewife and mother is typical of many: «There is always something appealing about the STOP AIDS campaigns. There is nobody who is not going to understand this one with the little figures. I am totally in favour of this kind of poster series being used again and again.»

## At first hand



*Innovative strategies are needed to address the problem of cocaine and designer-drug consumption in our society. In conjunction with experts and representatives of towns, communes and cantons, the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health (SFOPH) is promoting efforts to find appropriate solutions.*

*Cocaine use is potentially a problem for the population as a whole and is already a serious one for specific risk groups. The users consist of individuals with poor social integration who often consume other substances such as tobacco, alcohol or opiates in addition to cocaine, and of two groups who receive little public attention: socially well integrated young adults who use cocaine on a regular basis, and the equally well integrated group of young party-goers who engage in the occasional use of cocaine in addition to other substances. Users who consume only cocaine are relatively rare. But the use of cocaine along with other drugs increases the health risks already associated with the substance.*

*Unlike the situation with dependent heroin users, no really specific medication-based or non-medication-based treatment has yet been developed for dependent cocaine users.*

*Solutions are needed for the problems with which cocaine use is, or may be, associated in areas ranging from health and public order to security and youth policies. For such solutions to be developed, all the experts in the field have to work together on a more interdisciplinary and integrated basis.*

*The SFOPH is therefore promoting efforts to raise awareness of the problems associated with cocaine use. This includes organizing a national conference on designer drugs and cocaine to provide an open platform for dialogue between towns, communes, cantons and experts. This platform will enable existing problems and needs to be taken on board and the shape of possible future strategies to be discussed. The goal is to arrive at a broad consensus on the action that needs to be taken to achieve innovative and practicable solutions.*

## Manuela Schmundt

*Swiss Platform for Coordination and Services in the Domain of Substance Abuse (KDS)  
Swiss Federal Office of Public Health*

## Credits

No. 44 / May 2004

«spectra – Prevention and Health Promotion» is a newsletter of the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health published six times a year in German, French and English. Some of the views expressed in it may diverge from the official stance of the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health.

**Published by:**  
Swiss Federal Office  
of Public Health  
CH-3003 Berne  
Tel. +41 31 323 87 79  
Fax. +41 31 322 24 54

**Produced by:**  
Pressebüro  
Christoph Hoigné

Allmendstrasse 24  
CH-3014 Berne

**Head of Editorial Board:**  
Markus Allemann  
markus.allemann@bag.  
admin.ch

**Contributors:**  
SFOPH staff, Ch. Hoigné  
and others

**Translation:**  
BMP Translations AG,  
Basel

**Photos:**  
Christoph Hoigné,  
Keystone Press,  
Peter Leuenberger

**Graphic design:**  
Lebrecht typ-o-grafik,  
3147 Aekenmatt

**Printed by:**  
Beag Druck AG,  
Emmenbrücke

**Print-run:**  
German: 6 000;  
French: 4 500;  
English: 2 000

**Individual issues  
of «spectra» can  
be ordered from:**  
Bundesamt  
für Gesundheit  
Dienst Kampagnen  
CH-3003 Berne  
Tel. +41 31 323 87 79  
Fax +41 31 322 24 54  
www.bag.admin.ch  
kampagnen@bag.admin.ch

**Next issue:** June 2004

**Contact:** Sylvie Leuthold, SFOPH  
Campaigns and Marketing Section,  
CH-3003 Berne,  
tel. +41 31 323 87 69

# Welcome support for cannabis prevention in schools

**Cannabis prevention.** Cannabis use is widespread among young people and can jeopardize their healthy development. The Swiss Federal Office of Public Health (SFOPH) is supporting primary prevention activities, early identification of users in schools and municipalities and the provision of information for professionals in the field, teachers, parents and young people, as well as an international project on the «brief intervention» in cannabis addiction. The «School and Cannabis» guidelines recently distributed to all senior secondary schools has met with a very positive response.



The use of cannabis is first and foremost a youth phenomenon. A good third (35%) of all 16-20 year olds consume, or have consumed, cannabis. Most of them do so once, to see what it's like, or only occasionally. However, about 8% of this age group use the substance every day. Action therefore needs to be taken to address the problem of young, regular users whose behaviour in this respect attracts attention in school or during their apprenticeship, and whose healthy development is at jeopardy.

## Wide range of prevention programmes

Cannabis prevention is well established, with the SFOPH supporting a large number of prevention programmes for children and young people. Through the «Education & Health – Swiss Network», the Confederation (in conjunction with the cantons) is active in schools, the «fil rouge» programme promotes prevention in children's homes, «supraf» is a dependence-research and prevention programme for young people at risk, Radix Health Promotion is actively involved in the municipalities on behalf of the SFOPH, «voilà» supports prevention of addiction in organized youth work, «funtasy project» and the DOJ (open youth-work umbrella organization) in open



youth work, while «LaOla» is present in sports clubs and – through the publication «My child too...?» – in the family as well.

## Welcome guidelines

In conjunction with the Drugs Competence Centre (SFA) of the «Education & Health – Swiss Network» programme, the SFOPH has drawn up a set of guidelines designed to alleviate the health-related and social problems associated with

cannabis. Particular support is given to schools that have repeatedly to address the issue of cannabis use. In the context of the «School and Cannabis» project, they recently received a set of guidelines to help them draw up a prevention programme for dealing with cannabis and other addictive substances.

The cannabis prevention guidelines are in great demand: The first print-run of 13,000 was used up within a matter of weeks, and a second print-run of 20,000 is now being produced. «This enormous demand and the many positive responses have far exceeded our expectations», says Walter Minder, project head at the SFOPH. Is this great demand an indicator for the scale of the problem in the schools?

Heinz Jenni, class teacher at the Liebfeld-Steinhölzli senior secondary school in the municipality of Köniz, perceives the problem in terms of waves. «One year, hardly anyone uses cannabis, the next year lots of them are doing it. Those who do usually have other problems as well.» Jenni has found the uncer-



tainty arising from the revision of the law to be quite a problem in the last few years. «The kids pick up things in the media and then argue that cannabis is going to be legalized anyway, so what's all the fuss about?» He considers the newly issued guidelines a positive step, but warns against hoping for miracles from them. «The reality is that it depends largely on whether the individual teacher can cope with the problem.»

## Basis for prevention work

«Smoking dope is very 'in' at Köniz's senior secondary schools,» says Anja Nowacki, head of Köniz's municipal prevention unit. So she considers the SFOPH guidelines «helpful, to say the least». And she says they've come at just the right time. The guidelines are now going to be integrated into the already planned focus on cannabis, which will include a 2-hour meeting for staff of the municipality's five senior secondary schools to launch the guidelines systematically and motivate teachers. According to Anja Nowacki, «We want to do more than just distribute the brochure – we want to show how it can be translated into practice in everyday school life.» The prevention unit, in conjunction with Köniz's counselling unit, is planning a course for parents which deals with the issue.

The new publication was also warmly welcomed elsewhere, in the canton of Basel-Stadt, for instance, where it has been used as a cornerstone of the cantonal government's 5-point programme on cannabis pre-

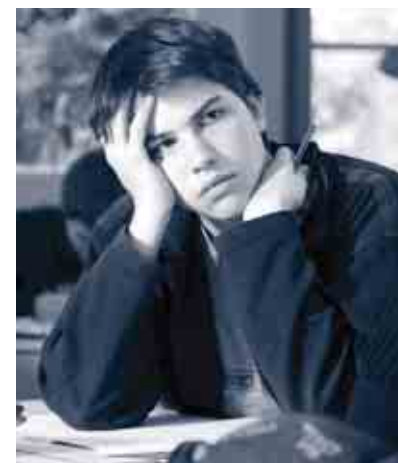
vention. «Staff at 42 schools are being asked to draw up a set of rules based on the guidelines,» explains Ueli Keller of the Schools unit at Basel's Education Department. The other four points commit the schools to defining a common stance for the teaching body as a whole and to incorporating cannabis prevention in the teaching programme and the school's culture, working with parents on the topic and cooperating with external agencies.

## Early identification in schools

In conjunction with its partners, the SFOPH's aim is to help young cannabis users kick the habit and thus avoid possible social marginalization. The goal is for the young people at risk to receive professional help at an early stage. After all, cannabis users are particularly at risk when the habit is compounded by additional problems such as emotional, family or social pressures.

The «School and Cannabis» project initiated in mid-February aims to reduce cannabis use in schools and other educational establishments. The guidelines sent to all senior secondary schools, including vocational colleges and grammar schools, are intended to help teachers draw up a prevention programme for dealing with the problem of addictive substances in schools. For this to be successful, cooperation between schools and prevention agencies and also with parents is essential. In a second step the SFOPH is supporting such

cooperation by providing a postgraduate diploma on the subject for professionals in the field. The schools benefit additionally by being able to cooperate with one of these professionals from their own region. They are coached on how to implement the guidelines and receive further training and support in handling individual cases.



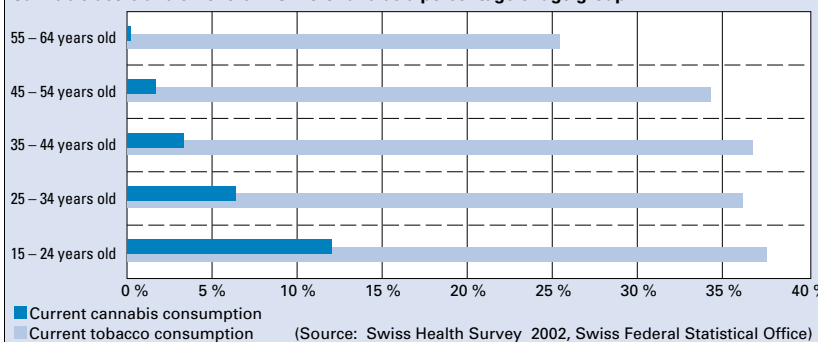
Source: smash 2002. Swiss multicenter adolescent study on health 2002

Further information for young people is provided at [www.tschau.ch](http://www.tschau.ch), [www.ciao.ch](http://www.ciao.ch) and [www.feelok.ch](http://www.feelok.ch).

Contact: Walter Minder, Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Unit, SFOPH, CH-3003 Bern, tel. +41 31 323 28 16, [walter.minder@bag.admin.ch](mailto:walter.minder@bag.admin.ch)

## Cannabis consumption as a youth phenomenon

Cannabis users and smokers in Switzerland as a percentage of age group



## International pilot project on brief interventions

September 2004 will see the start of a bi-national, 18-month-long project on the brief intervention in cannabis abuse and cannabis prevention in six drug counselling centres (three in Northern Switzerland and three in Southern Germany). The intervention programme comprises five individual counselling sessions and two group sessions over a period of ten weeks. The target group is cannabis users in the 15 – 30 age group who wish to stop, or at least reduce, their consumption. The goal is to bring about a significant reduction in individual consumption. The project also aims to develop, test and evaluate a brief-intervention programme that can be systematically integrated into the range of services provided

ed by drug counselling centres. The flanking PR and advertising measures are intended to trigger a critical public debate on the cannabis issue. The project is supported by the SFOPH, the German Ministry of Health and Social Security (Bonn) and the cantons of Basel-Stadt, Basel-Land and Aargau. The Department of Psychology at the University of Fribourg is responsible for evaluating the project.

Contact: Dr Peter Tossmann, delphi-gesellschaft für Forschung, Beratung und Projektentwicklung mbH, Berlin, tel.: +49 30 3940 9781, [tossmann@delphi-gesellschaft.de](mailto:tossmann@delphi-gesellschaft.de).