

What kind of measures are effective in combating alcohol abuse?

Preventing alcohol abuse. Alcohol abuse is one of the biggest health problems in Switzerland. At a careful estimate, the cost to society of its consequences amounts to at least 2.2 billion francs in direct and indirect costs, plus a further 4.3 billion francs in immaterial costs. Over 2100 deaths and 30,500 lost years of life are attributable to excessive alcohol consumption. This is exacerbated by the mental suffering experienced by relatives. With a per capita consumption of 9.0 litres of pure alcohol in 2003, Switzerland ranks internationally among the top alcohol-consuming countries.



From January 2005 police in Switzerland will be able to conduct random breath tests.

The book «Alcohol: no ordinary commodity. Research and public policy» by Babor⁽¹⁾ et al., which will be appearing in spring under the German title «Alkohol – Kein gewöhnliches Konsumgut. Forschung und Alkoholpolitik», contains a chapter about Switzerland and recommends measures to prevent alcohol abuse that were selected according to the following criteria:

- Has the measure proved effective in actually reducing alcohol-related problems?
- How many studies have been able to demonstrate the effect?
- Has the strategy already been successfully employed in different cultures?
- What is the relationship between the costs and the effect on the one hand and the cost of alternative measures on the other?

Best practice measures

According to Babor et al., the following ten recommendations – not listed in order of importance here – are those that best fulfil the above criteria:

- random breath testing of drivers
- lower permitted blood alcohol limit for drivers
- banning for drivers who violate alcohol regulations
- staged driving licence for beginners
- minimum age for purchasing alcohol and appropriate checks
- state monopoly on alcohol retailing
- restriction of the opening times of alcohol sales outlets
- limit on the density of sales outlets
- alcohol taxation
- short-term interventions by specialists (e.g. GPs) aimed at high-risk consumers

These ten recommendations can be summarized in the following four packages of measures, which are discussed in the later sections of this article:

- Road safety measures
- Structural measures at sales outlets
- Taxes
- Short-term interventions

Road safety measures

From 2005 Switzerland will have a new Law on Road Traffic, which will contain the following measures impacting on alcohol consumption:

- reduction in the blood alcohol limit from 80 to 50 mg per 100 ml;
- random breath testing
- cascade system of administrative measures that enables the length of driving bans to be extended after each repeat offence until the offender is eventually banned for life;
- probationary driving licence and two-phase training: new drivers receive a probationary driving licence valid for three years. The probationary period can be extended and, after repeated infractions, the licence can be revoked.

The new blood alcohol limit of 50 mg/100 ml and the cascade system for repeat offenders will be introduced on 1 January 2005, as will the zero tolerance strategy for driving under the influence of drugs. The probationary driving licence and 2-phase training will follow at the end of 2005.

Frequent police checks

Overall, these measures are a step in the right direction, particularly since they have proved effective in other countries. But the success of transport policy legislation will depend on its implementation, visibility and the perceived density of checks. In order to make potential drunk drivers realize that they are very likely to encounter a random police check, corresponding checks must be implemented not just for a short period following the change in the law, but on a permanent basis and with a high frequency.

Information and education

Other factors contributing to the lasting success of the above-mentioned measures include a comprehensive information and sensitization campaign designed to fix the

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No alcohol advertising

«Alcohol and sport don't go together», says Werner Starz, Head of Communications at the pan-European television channel Eurosport. Eurosport's managers take their responsibility to society very seriously and have therefore, with one exception, banned all alcohol advertising from their channels, which are accessible to 98 million households in 54 countries.

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Tobacco control



Smoking causes the deaths of 8,300 people in Switzerland every year and creates enormous social costs. The revised Tobacco Ordinance provides a stricter legal framework, while the Tobacco Prevention Fund, which commenced activities in April 2004, has around 18 million francs at its disposal to combat smoking. Find out how and where the Tobacco Prevention Fund is using its resources on

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new laws in the public mind. People must take it for granted that alcohol consumption and driving are incompatible activities.

Experience abroad has shown that a zero tolerance approach to alcohol consumption by novice drivers is an effective way of preventing alcohol-related road accidents. This measure is effective quite simply because new drivers are generally young and therefore not only inexperienced in handling cars but also in drinking alcohol, as a result of which they often underestimate its effect on them. The zero tolerance approach to alcohol consumption is not envisaged in the forthcoming change to Swiss legislation, although it has since been introduced not only in large parts of North America, but also in neighbouring Austria. It has reduced fatal night-time accidents caused by drivers under 21 years of age by 20%.

Regulations applicable to alcohol sales outlets

Federal and cantonal legislation bans the sale and serving of alcohol to young people under the ages of 16 and 18 respectively. Throughout Switzerland, spirits (including alcopops) may not be sold or served to those under 18. All cantons also forbid the serving of wine, beer and cider to under 16s. Ticino has an across-the-board limit of 18 for all alcoholic beverages. Moreover, the sale of alcoholic drinks in harmful quantities is a punishable offence according to the Swiss penal code.

ID checks for adolescents

These laws have been laxly implemented in the past. Investigations conducted in various cantons have repeatedly shown, for example, that children as young as 13 are readily served alcohol or are able to buy alcohol over the counter. The amended Article 37a of the Swiss Food Act of March 2002 stipulates

Bridging the gap

The Eurocare conference in Warsaw brought together representatives from EU member states with the ambitious goal of linking together alcohol researchers and policy makers.

Alcohol researchers and practitioners from across Europe convened in Warsaw from 16 to 19 June 2004 to share the results of their research and practical experience, to discuss priorities and to consider how measures can be implemented most effectively in an increasingly interconnected world. Liberalization, the opening up of markets and personal freedoms are not always compatible with the measures needed to protect the young and the alcohol-dependent.

The message of science

It can be difficult, particularly for those working on a daily basis in prevention and education programmes, to accept the message presented to us by science and the results of studies and analyses of preventive measures or programmes for combating alcoholism. This is because the scientists and their studies show us that what actually works in practice are measures that can be ordered by the state: compliance with the ban

on alcohol sales to minors, restriction of alcohol sales outlets, setting of high tax levels and tests for drink-driving. By contrast, the codes of conduct for retailers, educational measures and warnings about the dangers of alcohol are largely ineffective.

Political action

It is therefore up to governments and policy-makers to take the necessary action. Local and regional authorities are empowered to implement some of these measures, for example the issuing of licences for trading in alcoholic drinks and the regulation of opening times. Other national measures – particularly the taxation of alcoholic drinks – are now throwing up new problems: the liberalization of trade and the free movement of goods within the European Union have rendered obsolete the high taxes levied by the countries of northern Europe for public health reasons. Denmark and Finland have had to lower their taxes, and Sweden is

considering this option in order to reduce cross-border «tourism».

The time was ripe for scientific and prevention groups to organize themselves so that they are in a position to provide the relevant authorities, and Brussels in particular, with clear analyses and objective data. One nurtures the hope that this will gradually result in the development of a common policy and that there will now be a long-overdue resumption of discussion concerning the harmonization of alcohol taxes and a common approach towards the control of alcohol abuse and its consequences for public health and the economy of our continent.

Source: Communica, September 2004, Swiss Alcohol Board, Berne

www.eurocare.org

Contact: Irène Abderhalden, SFOPH, 3003 Berne, Tel. +41 31 324 97 76, irene.abderhalden@bag.admin.ch

that alcoholic drinks offered for sale must be clearly distinguishable from non-alcoholic drinks, and that signs indicating that the sale of alcoholic drinks to children and adolescents is not permitted must be prominently displayed at the sales points.

This requirement and general discussions about the protection of young persons in Switzerland have prompted a number of food chains to step up their efforts to incorporate legislation in the training of sales staff. Experience in other countries has clearly shown that it is not sufficient simply to display notices at all sales outlets. The checking of identity papers to catch potential under-age purchasers should become a routine practice.

The cantons are responsible for implementing this legislation. These days far too few checks on compliance are carried out, fines for offences are all too rarely issued and such fines as are imposed are often too low to have a deterrent effect.

Available everywhere and at any time

The so-called «needs clause», a licensing provision for sales outlets that specifies a certain ratio of bars to the number of inhabitants has been abolished in all cantons but one. From a health policy perspective this is extremely regrettable, because a connection has clearly been shown to exist between the density of sales

outlets and the quantity of alcohol consumed.

Further restrictions on the availability of alcohol have been lifted recently in Switzerland. For example, the permitted opening hours of sales outlets – including filling stations – have been extended in a number of cantons. Such longer opening hours are generally only worthwhile for outlets because of alcohol sales.

Taxation is effective

Higher taxation resulting in higher retail prices for alcoholic beverages is one of the most efficient and cost-effective ways of reducing alcohol consumption. In Switzerland, the special tax levied on alcopops is an example

Forum

Don't promote business interests at the expense of health



Experts know what kind of government policy on substance dependence is needed to support effective efforts to combat addiction. It has to be a policy that puts an end to the unequal treatment of addictive substances, focuses on prevention and targeted protection of the young, appeals to consumers' sense of responsibility and applies the same standards of risk to all addictive substances regardless of their settings. And perhaps most important of all: it is a policy that drives the market – and not vice versa. The Spinatsch Report outlines the cornerstones of such a policy on substance dependence.

protection of the young, appeals to consumers' sense of responsibility and applies the same standards of risk to all addictive substances regardless of their settings. And perhaps most important of all: it is a policy that drives the market – and not vice versa. The Spinatsch Report outlines the cornerstones of such a policy on substance dependence.

The reality is quite different, however. The present policy is a clash between business interests and health concerns and between ideological and expert arguments, with business and ideology generally coming off best. The outcome is a policy that is not only perceived by the public as being contradictory and inconsistent, but actually is all of these things. We only have to look at the decisions taken by the Swiss National Council on 14 June 2004: In the early afternoon, it reversed the ban on the sale of absinth; a few hours later, it buried the revision of the Swiss Narcotics Act, including the planned decriminalization of cannabis.

A further example: A few months earlier, the National Council deliberated on the revision of the Radio and Television Act (RTVG). On this occasion, too, the parliamentary majority succumbed to the temptation to engage one-sidedly in business promotion, regardless of the consequences for substance-dependence policy, by reversing the ban on alcohol advertising in private-sector electronic media. And with the Council of States commission signalling agreement with the National Council on this point at

the end of August 2004, there is now little hope of the proposal being turned down when it comes to be debated in the Upper Chamber.

The result is a barrage of mixed political messages that cannot be translated into practicable principles for action without engaging in mental contortions. This situation is particularly damaging with respect to young people. What sort of messages are they receiving?

«You're not allowed to smoke a joint. It's forbidden. But if you do, nothing will happen to you because it's only a minor offence and the police don't have time to deal with it. Unless you live in canton X or municipality Y. Then it's a different kettle of fish, even if the crime's the same.

You're allowed to drink alcohol. That's not forbidden. But we'd rather you didn't, or at least not in excessive amounts. And we certainly don't want you to be influenced in any way by alcohol advertising. But you've got to understand that business depends on money earned from advertising. Just don't let yourself be seduced by it.» These messages are double-tracked and ambiguous. Young people have long since seen through this policy

and consider it to be neither particularly intelligent nor credible.

The Fachverband Sucht, an association of experts and organizations working in the field of substance-dependence, is endeavouring to do away with these double standards. At the risk of sounding old-fashioned, I am convinced that a policy on combating addiction is credible only if it is prepared to give a coherent health-related approach priority over business interests. Force of circumstances in day-to-day politics may mean that this is not possible in every case. But to subordinate health systematically to business interests is both irresponsible and exploitative and the Fachverband Sucht is not prepared to accept it.

There is a need for all of us to enter the political arena and bring our concepts effectively to bear in the ongoing debate.

Bruno Erni,
President of the Fachverband Sucht

¹⁾ Spinatsch M.: Eine neue Suchtpolitik für die Schweiz? Bericht zuhanden des Bundesamtes für Gesundheit, Mai 2004 (A new policy on substance dependence for Switzerland? Report commissioned by the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health, May 2004).

Eurosport's advertising is alcohol-free

Sport without alcohol. The TV channel Eurosport provides 98 million households in 54 countries with upbeat sports programmes in 19 languages. Since March 2004 the station has featured practically no advertising for alcohol. Head of Communications Werner Starz explains why.



spectra: Just before the 2004 European Championships your station announced that it would no longer be advertising alcohol ...

Werner Starz: That's right. We no longer broadcast advertising for alcohol in our Europe-wide programmes. The only exception is programming for Germany (which can also be received in Switzerland), where we still permit advertising for beer because of an existing long-term advertising agreement.

Is the current advertising agreement with the beer producer the only contract that you will be honouring until it expires, or is there a possibility that you might conclude other beer agreements?

We are keeping a very close watch on the situation in Germany regarding beer. Germany is the only European country where our TV station is financed solely from advertising revenues, so we will have to consider the situation very carefully.

Why did Eurosport decide to stop broadcasting advertising for alcohol?

We decided some time ago that alcohol and sport don't go together. We also believe that in the coming years advertising legislation in Europe will be harmonized further, and that will mean that it will not be possible to advertise alcohol and tobacco products anywhere. We are anticipating this development and have stopped broadcasting alcohol advertising before it becomes illegal.

So political and legal changes were more of a deciding factor for you than the social aspects?

We wanted to set a very clear example, and we also wanted to beat our competitors to it.

But stopping advertising for alcohol must mean massive financial losses. How are you handling this situation?

Alcohol advertising was a very important element in the budget for a

number of sports. New contracts were being negotiated, but we still decided to stop this form of advertising. It wasn't an easy decision, particularly at the present time, when advertising revenues are difficult to come by. However, we have been monitoring developments on a long-term basis and have taken steps to manage the situation, and this has enabled us to compensate for most of the lost income. In fact, I believe that the absence of advertising for alcohol has made the promotional environment more attractive for other customers, such as the travel industry.

So you're not too worried about the financial aspect. Are you concerned about protecting young people?

Absolutely. Youth protection plays a major role in our activities, and we are involved in it on several levels. We support the EU anti-smoking campaign, for example, and sponsor the "Training young people for the Olympics" organization, Germany's major sports association for young people. We take our responsibility to society very seriously.

Mr Starz, thank you for talking to us.

At first hand



About one million people in Switzerland are high-risk drinkers, i.e. the amount of alcohol they consume puts themselves and others at risk. Alcohol abuse is one of Switzerland's biggest public-health problems. At a careful estimate, the cost to society of its consequences amounts to at least 2.2 billion francs in direct and indirect costs, plus a further 4.3 billion francs in immaterial costs. Each year, excessive alcohol consumption is responsible for 2,100 deaths and 30,500 lost years of life.

Binge drinking by young people is a relatively recent problem in Switzerland and has taken on a new dimension with the emergence of alcopops. This high-risk episodic drinking, i.e. consumption of five or more drinks per episode, is a huge risk to health. The intoxication induced increases readiness to engage in violence and the risk of accidents. The fact that more and more young people drink alcohol regularly is ground for concern and makes action essential.

If we are to get a grip on the problem of alcohol abuse, it is essential that we bundle our resources and exploit the resulting synergies. The Confederation, i.e. the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health in conjunction with the Federal Alcohol Administration, wants to step up cooperation between all the partners involved, including the cantons and municipalities and the private organizations active in the prevention field. For this reason a «National Programme Alcohol» is being drawn up in which the aspects that are of importance for prevention work, the resulting objectives and measures and the division of responsibilities and tasks between the different partners will be discussed and laid down. This process will probably take about two years to complete. In the meantime, the established projects launched in connection with the national alcohol-prevention campaign «Handle with care!» are to be continued, though on a somewhat reduced scale due to the Confederation's cost-cutting programmes.

It is important that all the players involved work towards the same goals. Only then will we be able – despite limited resources – to reduce alcohol consumption in the long term to a level that makes it not only a pleasurable but also a low-risk activity.

Anne Lévy
Head of Alcohol Section
Swiss Federal Office of Public Health

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of the success of this measure. Prevention organizations are considering an increase in beer duty as part of the revision of the law on beer taxation. The Swiss Federal Office of Public Health supports these efforts given that beer remains the most popular alcoholic beverage and is consumed by young men in potentially harmful quantities.

In 1999, as a result of the GATT agreements, hitherto differing levels of taxation for foreign and domestic spirits had to be realigned in favour of a more uniform taxation system. As a result, taxes on a large number of foreign spirits (e.g. whiskies) were significantly reduced, while the taxes on Swiss spirits (such as fruit schnapps) were slightly raised. As expected, the reduction in prices subsequently led to a demonstrable increase in the consumption of spirits.

Potential for short-term interventions

Short-term interventions refer to preventive measures or prophylactic treatment before or shortly after the occurrence of alcohol-related problems. They can be implemented by trained doctors and other professionals working in primary care (e.g. in hospital emergency units) and aim primarily to reduce high-risk alcohol consumption. Various studies have shown such interventions to be an efficient and relatively cost-effective means of reducing alcohol consumption and alcohol-related harm.

Short-term interventions by doc-

tors formed part of the «Handle with care!» national alcohol programme. This project is currently in a review process, after which a decision will be taken on whether to continue the project, and if so in what form. In Switzerland, short-term interventions have, to date, played a relatively insignificant role in the work of doctors or social workers.

These results will be incorporated into the development of the Swiss «National Programme Alcohol», tak-

ing account of the political situation in the country.

¹⁾ Babor et al. «Alcohol: no ordinary commodity. Research and public policy» Oxford University Press 2003

Contact:

Anne Lévy, SFOPH, 3003 Berne,
Tel. +41 31 325 12 66,
anne.levy@bag.admin.ch

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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

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Basel

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Bundesamt für Gesundheit
Dienst Kampagnen
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Tel. +41 31 323 87 79
Fax +41 31 322 24 54
www.bag.admin.ch
kampagnen@bag.admin.ch

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Sustainable tobacco prevention

Tobacco Prevention Fund. At 32%, Switzerland has one of the highest smoking rates in Europe – each year around 8,000 people in the country die from the consequences of smoking. This causes direct social costs of over 5 billion Swiss francs a year. The Tobacco Prevention Fund is an expression of the determination of the Swiss parliament and Federal Council to strengthen tobacco prevention efforts. The fund is financed through a levy of 2.6 centimes on each pack of cigarettes sold, generating an annual income of 18 million francs for tobacco prevention.

On 5 March 2004, the Swiss Federal Council enacted the Ordinance on the Tobacco Prevention Fund. The fund was set up specifically to finance preventive measures, discourage people from taking up smoking, help people quit smoking and protect the general public from passive smoking. Working in cooperation with the Federal Office for Sports (FOSPO), the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health (SFOPH) has set up a separate agency to administer the fund. The agency has been operational since 1 April 2004.

Agency within the SFOPH

The Tobacco Prevention Fund Agency fosters contacts with internal and external partners within a tobacco prevention network and is tasked with elaborating and implementing the fund's objectives by supporting appropriate projects.

The agency performs its tasks in cooperation with other agencies, in particular with the SFOPH's health policy department and national Tobacco Abstinence Programme and with FOSPO. The Swiss Federal Commission for Tobacco Prevention can also be consulted as required.

Communication

The Tobacco Prevention Fund Agency has set up the Internet platform www.tabak-praevention.ch as its principal information channel. The website provides

- background information on the Tobacco Prevention Fund
- summaries of supported projects
- information and documents required for submitting applications
- a description of the application review process
- the opportunity to subscribe to the Newsletter

Descriptions of the supported projects are subdivided into the areas of activity managed by the Tobacco Prevention Fund, i.e.:

- discouraging people from taking up smoking and helping them quit
- protection against passive smoking
- raising public awareness and providing information
- networking of organizations active in tobacco prevention and the creation of a framework for supporting preventive work
- promoting research

In addition to a brief description of the projects, including objectives and measures, the site also provides details of the sponsors and contact addresses. The agency also issues an annual programme, annual accounts and an annual report.

The successful development of a prevention project

The Tobacco Prevention Fund is designed to finance preventive measures that make a lasting and effective contribution towards a reduction in tobacco consumption. In order to achieve this goal, the projects will have to be of a high standard and meet strict requirements.

Accordingly, even the project development phase will play a crucial role in ensuring that these results and effects are secured. To facilitate the process, the Tobacco Prevention Fund will be issuing an application form that will take the authors step-by-step through a structured project development process: All of the necessary project management aspects are taken into account, from the current actual status via the target status, measurable objectives, target group definition, adequate measures for reaching the objectives, the communication and evaluation process and the project planning and organization. The quality criteria for successful project development in accordance with the «Quint-Essenz» standards are also integrated in the corresponding sections of the process as part of the systematic promotion and establishment of best practice. These are explained with the corresponding indicators in a supplementary document, enabling project developers to check their form before submission to the Fund against the instruments actually used by the agency itself.

The application review process

Each application for funding is processed by the agency according to a defined review process. Special attention is paid to the ability of the project to meet the Fund's objectives, fulfil the quality criteria and make a contribution to the national tobacco strategy. Furthermore, the applications are all reviewed by external experts. This process is anonymized to protect the



Warnings, declarations and maximum limits

Tobacco. On 1 November 2004 the Swiss Federal Council approved the completely revised Tobacco Ordinance. The key points of the new legislation are the introduction of clear warnings on tobacco products and the compulsory declaration of added substances. In addition, terms such as «light» or «mild» will no longer be permissible. New maximum limits will apply to tar and nicotine contents and carbon monoxide levels. Cigarettes for export, however, will not be affected by the Ordinance.

The new Tobacco Ordinance requires warnings on cigarette packs to be much more prominently displayed: they must now take up between 35% and 50% of the two pack sides and be highlighted with a border. The warnings must appear in the three official Swiss languages. The requirement to supplement warnings with colour photographs can be prescribed at a later date.

Swiss practice has been brought into line with EU regulations by banning terms such as «light» and «mild», a measure intended to stop consumers from assuming that mild cigarettes are less harmful. In addition to tar and nicotine contents, cigarette packs will now have

to state carbon monoxide levels, and maximum limits have been specified for all three harmful substances. However, the Swiss Federal Council has stopped short of stipulating the declaration of maximum limits on cigarette packs destined for export, believing that the importing countries should decide for themselves what products can be introduced and marketed and under what conditions.

The completely revised Ordinance meets the requirements of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which was signed by Switzerland in New York on 25 June 2004, and implements the latest EU regulations.

identity of both applicants and external experts. For projects involving sports and exercise, the Tobacco Prevention Fund Agency obtains an expert opinion from the Federal Office for Sports.

As a service unit, the Tobacco Prevention Fund Agency also offers consultancy services. These can be requested even before, or during, the project development phase. If the outcome of the review process indicates that a project qualifies for funding in principle but that certain aspects still need to be addressed, the agency contacts the applicants to dis-

cuss the further action to be taken.

Between the start of operations on 1 April 2004 and 1 December 2004, over 50 funding applications had been submitted. 16 of these have been approved, several are being revised by the applicants and 19 are currently passing through the review process.

Contact:

Yves Sandoz, Head of the Tobacco Prevention Fund, SFOPH,
CH-3003 Berne, +41 31 323 87 81,
yves.sandoz@bag.admin.ch
www.tabak-praevention.ch



European prize for «voilà»

In early October, «voilà», the Swiss health-promotion and drug-prevention programme aimed at children and young people, was awarded the «European Prevention Prize» at the First European Prevention Forum in Yekaterinburg, Russia. The «voilà» programme was developed by the Swiss council of youth associations, SAJV, with the support of the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health (SFOPH) and the Swiss Foundation for Health Promotion.

The prize was awarded by the Council of Europe's Pompidou Group in recognition of «voilà» as an innovative and highly participatory prevention programme with clearly defined goals. The European Prevention Prize was also awarded to the Slovenian project «Be Aware» and the UK's «Young Leaders in the Community».