Executive summary

Some 600 people from 47 European countries attended the conference and approximately 30 ministers and deputy ministers took part in the discussions. The European governments represented at the conference gave their support to a declaration on young people and alcohol. In addition, both the European Commission and all the EU ministers attending the conference expressed their support for the Swedish Presidency’s initiative concerning an EU strategy in the alcohol policy field. They endorsed the main idea of the Swedish plan during the informal talks they held with Lars Engqvist, Swedish Minister for Health and Social Affairs.

The declaration constitutes an important document for two primary reasons.

1. It offers the health ministers of the WHO and the EU Member States valuable support in their work to reduce the harmful effects of alcohol. Several ministers stated that with this declaration at their disposal they would be able to win backing for policy measures on the domestic front.

2. The declaration provides backing for policy efforts on behalf of European youth. In it, the various governments specify that young people are to be actively involved in the preparation, resolution, implementation and evaluation of measures directly relating to their age group.

The need for alcohol policy action became evident at the conference. A new WHO study was presented, showing that one death in four among young men aged 15–29 in Europe is alcohol-related. In parts of Eastern Europe, the figure is as high as one in three. A total of 55 000 young people in the WHO’s European region died from alcohol-related causes in 1999.

Figures from the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs, ESPAD, show that young people across Europe are increasingly drinking to get drunk.

The European Comparative Alcohol Study, ECAS, shows that there is convergence in per capita alcohol consumption, beverage preferences, alcohol-related mortality and the extent of alcohol policy measures.

The declaration, therefore, is designed to protect European youth from the harmful effects of alcohol and includes the following objectives:

- to delay the age of the onset of drinking by young people,
- to reduce substantially the number of young people who start consuming alcohol,
- to reduce substantially the occurrence and frequency of high-risk drinking among young people, especially adolescents and young adults,
- to provide and/or expand meaningful alternatives to alcohol and drug use and increase education and training for those who work with young people,
- to increase young people’s involvement in youth health-related policies,
to minimise the pressures on young people to drink, especially in relation to alcohol promotions, free distribution, advertising, sponsorship and availability, with particular emphasis on special events.

The conclusions of the EU working group focused mainly on the need for, and the value of, action at community level:

- more comparable data about young people is needed,
- there is need for some sort of structure to collect and evaluate the information,
- actions are needed at both national and community level,
- multi-disciplinary actions are required,
- alcohol is an important health determinant and cannot therefore be treated merely as a common commodity,
- the situation has become worse – in all countries and in all age groups,
- there is some convergence in the Union but, at the same time, there are still differences,
- EU action is needed to minimise the pressures to drink among young people

Commissioner David Byrne, who spoke at the closing session of the conference, stressed two important guiding principles for the continuing work of the Commission and the EU Member States.

1. The rules and laws already in existence with regard to young people and alcohol, such as age limits and constraints on advertising, must be enforced.
2. The alcohol industry must now take responsibility for its actions. The draft recommendations on young people and alcohol contain unequivocal rules concerning the way in which the alcohol industry should behave.

Commissioner Byrne appealed explicitly to representatives of the alcohol industry to take the opportunity to show that they can abide by voluntary agreements:

“Let me pass on a clear message to industry – this recommendation is a challenge for the alcohol industry in Europe today. It is a challenge to demonstrate that voluntary codes can work. A chance to show that you can take a responsible attitude to young people and alcohol in your marketing and promotion. A chance to convince regulators at national and European level that dialogue produces positive results on the ground. And I call on the industry at all levels – whether it is producers, advertisers or retailers – to seize this opportunity to show their commitment to the responsible promotion of alcohol. It is not an opportunity to be taken lightly. So, industry, if you are listening, the ball is now in your court.”

Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, who was one of the opening speakers, also noted that the behaviour of the industry has made it increasingly difficult to protect children and adolescents from the promotion of alcoholic beverages.

“Not only are children growing up in an environment where they are bombarded with positive images of alcohol, but our youth is a key target of the marketing practices of the alcohol industry. By mixing alcohol with fruit juices, energy drinks and pre-mixed “alcopops”, and by using advertising that focuses on youth
lifestyle, sex, sports and fun, the large alcohol manufacturers are trying to establish a habit of drinking alcohol at a very young age. We need to strengthen our work to counter these influences.”

Mr Engqvist closed the conference by giving his own impressions and summed up the meeting in the following words:

“Alcohol concerns everybody – all have some experience of alcohol. It is something very personal and private and, at the same time, alcohol is a political issue dealt with by ministers. Most times these worlds never meet. But this conference has from the very beginning been a conference where these two perspectives have lived side by side. Despite the complexity of the alcohol issue, the mixture of different personal experiences, cultural differences and age differences, a dialogue has been developed at the conference. The result has been the decision to have a common approach and a common position to minimise the harm done by alcohol to young people. And for the first time, a declaration on young people and alcohol has been developed and adopted together with young people themselves.”
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