

Report of the meeting of the Sexual Health Forum

*(held on 13 January 2010 in Brussels
Meeting in Borschette*

SUMMARY REPORT

1. Summary

The meeting served to identify more main elements of possible action towards a sexual health strategy at European level for which guidance could be sought from the incoming Commissioner later in spring of 2010. The meeting was important to streamline a roadmap for the future process and should be used to identify synergies between a European discussion and national programmes and activities. Key points that were identified already in the past should be further strengthened through this meeting.

The meeting was divided into three blocks, all looking at different aspects to be considered for a useful sexual health strategy: **medical issues** (e.g. sexually transmitted infections and its consequences on psychological and reproductive health), **social elements** (influence of alcohol and drugs, sexual health information at schools, teenage pregnancies) and **policy and conceptual issues** (wider understanding of sexuality, communication with young people, sexual relationship education).

DG SANCO's Director-General Robert Madelin opened the meeting reflecting on the process and key aspects to consider towards a comprehensive strategy on sexual health for young people, with a clear reference to the youth health initiative launched in 2009: (i) intensify cooperation between stakeholders as useful as possible, (ii) data and research, (iii) development of a toolbox of instruments to be recommended to be done, (iv) communication from a holistic perspective. Crucial questions driving the future process are: what are the priorities for the year to come, which are the key issues to map? This meeting should contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of crucial gaps and questions that must be tackled in the future.

SANCO's Director for Public Health and risk assessment, Andrzej Rys, who chaired the meeting, and the participants identified a clear need for further action. In the Youth Forum on 13 July 2009 representatives of young people coming from all countries of the European Union have asked for comprehensive and effective policies on sexual health. As the issue is on the political agenda of multiple Member States, strengthened cooperation and exchange of best practice

would create an added European value and respond to the demands of the constituency.

The meeting identified the following **key issues** for the development of a sexual health strategy for young people:

- Reflecting **dialogue** in testing and counselling (Sweden)
- **Empowerment** of young people to find their own informed decision on sexual behaviour –in this context the age limit of consent to sexual relation but also the age of answering to surveys were discussed as well as the chance that young people claim information on STIs from their doctors (Malta, Youth Forum, IPPF, all)
- **Training** of medical professionals (doctors and nurses) on sexual health issues (in both, diagnosis and psychology) and the advantage of counselling young people through so called Health Champions , doctors who train their colleagues (Jan Clark, Alain Giami)
- using **vaccination schemes** (e.g. Human Papilloma Virus) as opportunities and entry points to provide counselling on other aspects of SRH (WHO)
- **Confidentiality** also in partner notification (IPPF)
- A **right based approach** to sexuality rather than one of morality or public health – "draw sexuality out of the medical setting" (all)
- Respect of sexual **diversity** (Giami, IPPF)
- Youth appropriate methods of **communication** (UK, Sweden)
- An **early start** of sexual relation education (in Finland starting in Kindergarden)
- Inclusion of **parents and teachers** in the training on sexual health (Finland)
- Specific approaches to address **men** and convince them of the need of testing, using training in vocational schools (DK, Finland)
- Addressing **multi risk behaviour** especially drugs and alcohol (Cook, De Looze)
- Development of **Curricula** for sexual relationship education
- The **setting of targets** (Sweden) as a successful means to promote sexual health strategies

The discussion remained open with regard to the question how to address best the group estimated at 20 % of young people at particular risk of drug use and associated sexual problems (alcohol being often linked to unprotected sex).

The points were elaborated in presentations (available on SANCO's website) and a Round table discussion of Malta, Poland, Finland on the one hand and representatives of the Youth Forum and academia on the other hand.

WHO reported on its work on standard setting for sex education which will be published in April 2010. A workshop on sexual health will take place in October 2010 in Spain. WHO suggested to combine this meeting with a further meeting of the Sexual health Forum and asked whether the Commission will develop a strategy on sexual health for young people at European level in which case WHO would refrain from doing this for the European Union.

The future secretariat – Rutgers-Nisso- gave a brief description of the institute.

In his conclusion Director Rys defined the next steps:

- It is planned that the Commission will be assisted by a scientific secretariat to promote the work of the Sexual Health Forum. He invited Ine Vanwesenbeeck from Rutgers Nisso to present the Dutch knowledge centre for sexuality. The first task of the secretariat will be the mapping of Member States strategies for Sexual Health till October 2010 based on real-world performance indicators. The planned contract foresees the possibility of holding more meetings with different formats and the scientific preparation of all meetings.
- SANCO intends a call for tender on best ways of communicating sexual health to young people by researching private business means and methods to attract the interest of young people.
- The idea to have an EU wide survey on the knowledge of young people on sexual health needs further deliberation because of legal age limits to surveying adolescents without parental consent.
- Cooperation will be enhanced with all stakeholders and the possibility of exchanging experts funded by Commission instruments should be used.
- It will be for the incoming Commissioner for Health and Consumers to give political guidance.
- The next meeting should be scheduled in early autumn; more policy makers should attend in order to further develop a strategy