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The Club Health Conference 2010: An External Point of View

Party scenes around the globe have been flooded with new synthetic substances distributed via the Internet. The advent of designer drugs has changed production, distribution channels and consumption patterns, posing new basic challenges to addiction prevention efforts and drug policies. That is one of the major insights of the international Club Health conference in Zurich

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As a journalist and observer of the three day conference at Zurich's X-TRA night club, I had the opportunity to acknowledge a world-wide public health problem on a global scale. The topic «Nightlife drug and alcohol consumption» attracted delegates from more than twenty countries, from Australia to the USA. The international character of plenary and workshop sessions outlined a kaleidoscope of preventive measures, research methods and studies. While the drug policies of the individual countries represented may have differed vastly, it was apparent that three core questions arose:

1. What characterizes effective prevention today?
2. Does it still make sense to illegalize (new) substances ?
3. How can we spread the word about insight gained on the ground or in research and influence decision-takers?

In order to approach these questions, we need to review the market for addictive substances and its latest developments as outlined by the Zurich conference's experts.

A changing drug market

Data collection by the UN and the EU has shown that the drug market is undergoing major changes. Synthetic substances have spread like wildfire; due to the internet, marketing has become global. Consumers comment on the effects and quality of substances in web blogs, causing the demand for a specific substance to soar at the blink of an eye. A good example is the almost epidemic spread of the amphetamine derivative Mephedrone, in the UK in 2009. In general, the supply of easily available, cheap, and often legal substances with unknown health risks has increased world-wide.

The booming market for synthetic drugs has impacted on their production. The drugs are produced in local labs or at home: «shake'n'bake» is a method to produce crystal methamphetamine, by mixing highly explosive chemical components in a plastic bottle. After production the regulatory void within the World Wide Web allows the marketing of drugs as if they were new candy bars.

Consequently, the easy availability of new substances in clubs and on the streets has triggered a change in consumption patterns. Rather than staying focussed on one drug, consumers mix several substances («polydrug use»), pursuing a state of severe intoxica-

tion on weekends («bingeing»). Moreover, ever since the exclusive use of ecstasy has declined, problematic alcohol consumption levels have returned. Alcohol makes for an easier combination with synthetic substances and cocaine, which is widely available nowadays. The increasing use of party drugs has therefore created new risks to public health, which in return creates new challenges for substance addiction experts. One of the conference speakers compared synthetic drugs to Pandora's box – once opened, evils will sweep the world and cannot be stopped.

Challenges for prevention

In prevention efforts, the advance of new synthetic substances has resulted in a clarification process about what measures really work. Zero-tolerant, repression-based policies have been difficult to enforce in the past; now they become utterly ineffective - as even police representatives will admit. Given the omnipresence of easily available, seemingly risk free and often legal drugs, supply reducing measures are basically impossible to sustain.

Also drug prevention is confronted with the new challenge of reaching out to alcohol and drug consumers who regard a «legal high» as part of a regular weekend, showing no awareness of the risks involved.

The conference presented several best practices:

- prevention through environment-related intervention rather than face-to-face persuasion of consumers; for example, training bar personnel in how to deal with excessive consumption, and self-regulation of club owners who establish certain public health quality standards such as the «Safer Clubbing» label
- consumer-oriented educational work such as video games providing entertaining information about certain substances in the chill-out room, close to the consumer scene
- consumer-oriented prevention such as Zurich's integrative «Drug Checking» program that lets consumers have their substances tested anonymously, linking prevention with a service that consumers perceive as useful.

In general, approaches seem to be effective if they:

- aim at helping consumers make a well-informed choice as to which substances they take, and in which combination and quantity
- take the motivational patterns of consumers seriously and see the subjective benefit pragmatically, without passing



judgment

- enjoy high credibility within a scene because they are based on peer-work sharing know-how about the substances and club cultures.

The implications of legal vs. illegal

The fact that labs can randomly model new drugs and flood the market breathes new life into the old question of whether to legalize or ban drugs. The law will always be one step behind the ingenuity of drug lab experts. Apparently, just days before mephedrone was banned in the UK, marketers of the substance offered a new derivative not covered by the narcotics laws. In light of this, we cannot go on ignoring that the law and the repression machinery are on a «mission impossible». Occasional drug seizures and drug ring busts have proven to be mere Pyrrhic victories.

They do not care whether a substance is legal or illegal. On the one hand, they care about the personal benefit they derive from a substance, whether it is an upper or downer, or how well it goes with other substances. On the other hand, they are interested in risks such as potential health consequences or financial expenditure. In other words, drug consumers are establishing a cost-benefit analysis, but how about their knowledge base?

Politicians all over the globe however continue to pursue the path of criminalizing new substances. National narcotics laws ban the trade and consumption of drugs, often under draconian punishment, but fail when it comes to enforcement. Crowded jails are a burden on national budgets, but the problems derived from broad-based harmful consumption have not been reduced. An alternative for legislators would be to apply the laws that govern the distribution of medicines and turn certain substances into prescription drugs. Whether that would be an effective solution or not, remains under debate. The outcome would implement double legal standards where certain amphetamine derivatives are legal whereas the original substance continues to be banned. What is the difference between a legal neuro-enhancer such as Ritalin and an illegal one? And: Why are «natural» substances such as cocaine or opium illegal? Is it because they are plant-based, or because they are extremely harmful under public health aspects, and if so, why should alcohol be a legal substance?

The emergence of new substances and substance derivatives urgently calls for a debate by legislators concerning the general principles of dealing with addictive substances.

How about politicians?

Impressions from the Zurich Club Health conference seem to suggest that the results gained in the field are quite uniform, even across borders. The question of how these findings can be translated into appropriate political action remains unanswered. Unfortunately, across party lines, it does not seem to be a very attractive option for politicians to speak out in favor of legalizing drugs simply because that would not resonate with the electorate. We can observe on the contrary that the tides have turned, for instance in Switzerland where the debate concerning legalization of cannabis seems to have been shelved for the time being. Innovative prevention methods like the «Drug Checking» program have stirred so much political controversy that they have barely been applied despite evidence to their effectiveness. In that context, it appears to be hard to motivate political decision-makers to embark upon new directions in drug policy. Intrinsically repressive policies and their pragmatic implementation will probably continue.

The chasm between the insight gained in addiction work and the intention pursued by drug policies creates new challenges for the future. We need to establish efficient community relations that keep the public and political decision-makers informed about new trends, pointing to discrepancies between legal regulations and their implementation. Lobbying work in prevention seems to remain in its infancy, as symbolized by the absence of politicians at the 2010 Club Health conference.

A first step toward influencing political decisions could consist of bundling forces and know-how, defining best practices and benchmarks; in a nutshell, in finding a more coherent and less fragmented prevention practice. Networking efforts between regional and national institutions and projects are a prerequisite to tackling the global public health problem of harmful drug consumption. Supranational organizations such as the UN or EU have already provided the scientific foundation for a global perspective and the necessary data for early warning when it comes to new substances and their epidemic spread.

One thing is certain; the challenges for drug prevention in and out of nightlife are substantial. Perhaps at the end of the day the new realities on the drug market will result in a productive debate about which drug policies work and which do not. The 2010 Club Health conference was a suitable platform for comparing and reviewing practices and regulations on an international scale. ●

Links related to Nightlife

Infoset Direct

This month's special site of interest - related to Club Health conference topics.
www.infoset.ch/de/Special_Topics/nightlife.htm

Crew 2000

Drugs information, support and advice: sexual health information, volunteering, safer nightlife initiatives & capacity building training.
www.crew2000.org.uk

Ecstasydata.org

EcstasyData.org is an independent laboratory pill testing program.
www.ecstasydata.org

Dance-safe.org

A harm reduction organization providing drug information and pill testing services to the dance community in the United States and Canada
www.dance-safer.org

Enlighten.org

Enlighten Harm Reduction is a lobbyist organisation based in Melbourne, Australia.
www.enlighten.org.au

Democracy, Cities & Drugs

Aims to improve nightlife prevention programs and training for professionals and peer workers working on the front-line with drug users in nightlife settings.
www.democitydrug.org/index.php?page=safier-night-life

Club-Health.eu

The «Club Health – Healthy and Safer Nightlife of Youth» project: twenty associated and fifteen collaborating partners from fifteen EU Member States
www.club-health.eu

TRIP-Project

«TRIP» provides safer sex and safer drug use information and supplies to party people in Toronto's electronic music communities.
www.trippproject.ca/trip

EMCDDA

Reports and information concerning European drug trends.
www.emcdda.europa.eu/drug-situation

Expert information concerning different types of drugs.
www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/drug-profiles

UNODC

Reports and information concerning Worldwide drug trends.
www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis