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YOUNG DRINKING AND ITS PREVENTION

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Summary

In recent decades alcohol abuse has gained new dimensions in its form of mass drinking, especially among young people. In Europe, the problem is additionally aggravated by the fact that the fertility rate is much too low to guarantee the simple reproduction of the autochthonous population. A qualitative study of early drinking in Slovenia has detected three major risk factors: (1) young people underestimate the damaging biochemical impact of alcohol on the drinker, (2) they are accepting a behavioral pattern that views drinking and drunkenness as a normal component of peer partying, (3) their favored experience is having fun at the moment, where the temporary feeling of elation functions as a drug-produced filler of their existential vacuum. – The concluding part of the presentation describes the features of the Anton Trstenjak Institute model of preventing young drinking: regular preventive work integrated into primary school programs, started at a pre-puberty age, continued to the end of primary education, and based on a working partnership between experts, parents, teachers, children, and young volunteers.

Key words: young drinkers, adolescence, alcohol abuse, alcohol, drug habit, addictions, alcohol prevention among teenagers

1. European youth in the circumstances of an alcohol condoning culture

Research and everyday experience show that alcohol abuse and other forms of drug use by young people are becoming an increasingly serious problem in Slovenia as well as the whole of Europe. The phenomenon of teenage drinking on a mass scale is without a precedent in history.

What makes the problem even more severe is the demographic crisis in Europe: Slovenia's total fertility rate of 1.2 children per woman is almost half too small for the young generation to maintain the current level of the domestic population. This is further aggravated by the fact that the autochthonous Slovenian population is numerically small to begin with, so that the one-thousand-year-old Slovenian culture must be kept alive by a mere two million people.

The main characteristic of young people today is the lack of a stable personal and social identity and of a promising future (insecurity about employment, place to live, and especially a stable relationship and family; and finally about the meaning of life and work). This is the essential cause for the abuse of alcoholic and other psychoactive substances in the European culture.

An international study of late childhood which investigated a sample of nine-, eleven-, and thirteen-year-olds in order to find how well they were prepared for the roles they would have to assume in society, at work, and in private and familial relationships (Bajzek et al. 2003) showed, for example, that there was a big difference between Slovenian and Italian children. The children in Slovenia receive much less support from the determining aspects of the social network (transference of knowledge from competent people); they do not believe in their own strengths (talent, work); and they find much less support in transcendental powers (religion). The situation is shown in table 1 (cf. Ramovš and Hvalič 2003: 203).

Table 1:

It will help your (boy/girl) in future if (in %):

	Slovenian children	Italian children
you gain knowledge and advice from experts	56	76
you spend every day studying	49	81
you are intelligent, talented	61	85
you believe in God or have a religion	37	68

2. A study of young drinkers' behavioral patterns (2006)

Using the qualitative method of active participation the Anton Trstenjak Institute investigated the events, processes, and dynamics that determine young drinkers' behavior inside the psychosocial environments of their families and circles of adolescent drinking companions. The study includes an analysis of a hundred stories of alcohol abusers aged between 15 and 25, and notes made while participating in events where young people consume alcohol to inebriation. Three paths were found to lead young people into alcohol abuse and addictions:

- (1) Young people underestimate or totally fail to understand the harmful biochemical effect of alcohol as an inebriant (*»There's no harm in drinking!«*).
- (2) Young people find it hard to resist the socially powerful pattern of behavior which considers drinking and drunkenness to be a matter-of-course feature of peer group partying, particularly at week-end booze-ups and on festive occasions (the slang slogan *»Drinking rules!«*). This pattern of behavior is connected with the pattern of relationships in their families: there seem to be three risk types of family (the dysfunctional family due to one of the parents being an alcoholic; the family rigidly objecting to alcohol consumption, where the child develops a dual attitude toward alcohol at home and in his or her peer group; and the liberal and ambitious family, in which the parents require the child to be a high-achiever in school but are tolerant of his or her drinking sprees).
- (3) The experience these young people favor is their feeling good and having fun at the moment (*»Nothing but fun!«*), which functions as a drug-produced filler of their existential vacuum as described by Viktor E. Frankl.

The results of this qualitative study in concrete drinking environments complement the previously gathered quantitative data about young alcohol abusers in Slovenia, especially those gathered by the ESPAD survey.

3. A model of preventing alcohol abuse in primary school pupils

It is an action-and-development program based on scholarly findings and good practices which have opened two gateways to the successful prevention of early substance abuse and dependence:

- (1) Joint efforts (synergy) of parents, children, schools, young trained volunteers, and alcoholic experts through a protracted period of time. Specifically trained students conduct monthly workshops for the children as part of the regular curriculum. The parents and the teachers parallelly attend three hours of preventive workshops. The work of all participants in the program is interconnected to form a unified net.
- (2) The proper time to begin organized public prevention in schools is just before puberty. This means that the work is most intensive when the children are ten years old, but it does not stop there. All the aforesaid groups continue the preventive program in the form of workshops twice a year until the end of primary school, that is, until the children are aged fifteen.

The essence of a prevention program is that it is persistently carried out over a long time. Consequently, this program is designed for a period of at least one generation, which means that its goal will really be successfully achieved only after the present ten-year-olds have become volunteers during their years at college.

Successful prevention of alcohol abuse and other forms of substance dependence comprises three inseparable elements:

- (1) Some science-based knowledge about the damaging effect of alcohol—this is the smallest and easiest element of the program.
- (2) Information and training that enable a young man or woman to adopt the right attitude toward the consumption of alcohol in a society favorably disposed to drinking—this is a larger and more demanding element.
- (3) Exercises in good habits enabling a young man or woman to realize their attitude toward alcohol in the real world and generally protecting him or her against yearning to get high and addiction. Good habits form the main part of what is termed quality life and coexistence—the acquiring of good habits is the largest and the most demanding element of a successful prevention of addiction and substance abuse.

The Anton Trstenjak Institute has been introducing this program into various primary schools at the request of the local communities and the schools. The immediate evaluation, conducted all along at the levels of all five participating groups, shows that the program is realistically designed, open to development, and successful. When the action-research project of developing the model is concluded, the program will be ready for general implementation at the national level.