

Greetings,

This presentation is about prevention programs on young adolescents in the region of Thessaloniki. These particular programs are realized by our Unit, the Therapeutic Unit for alcohol prescribed drugs and gambling addiction. Thessaloniki is the second biggest city in Greece and is situated in North Greece, within the periphery of Central Macedonia. The periphery of Central Macedonia holds 1.874.632 people and 45% of its labour is in Trade, whilst 15% in the industry. The region of Thessaloniki has above the national average in unemployment (11.34% whilst greek national level is 10.5%) and its biggest contribution to the GNP comes from Industry. Its also a region that received the brunt of the recent immigration waves from eastern Europe, with strong demographic changes in many areas.

Our unit is an out patient service of the Psychiatric Hospital of Thessaloniki. It begun operating in 1989 and provides therapy for addiction problems with alcohol, gambling or prescribed drugs. Its range of interventions includes Family therapy, Group Therapy and individual therapy. It is the only public Unit for Alcohol treatment in the North of Greece, and is comprised of a counseling station and a clinic. It also provides training for doctors specializing in Psychiatry, psychiatric nurses, psychologists etc. It takes part in research projects on a national level. In addition it is involved in prevention, particularly in secondary education in the Thessaloniki region and with contributions and an advisory role on a national level development of policies concerning alcohol treatment and prevention .

Before we proceed to detail the prevention programs that we were involved, we would like to give out some information about the context that we work on. The issue of alcohol consumption is one of the most important issues in national and international level. EKTEPN is a government funded research agency which from the year 2002 begun the collection of data from various agencies on issues regarding substance abuse and addiction but also research data regarding the degree of alcohol consumption in the Greek population. As for the consumption, the most critical source of information is the repeating epidemiological studies done by EPIPSI, a University research institute, which involves the general population aged 16-24 and also school students.

More recent data from EPIPSI report in 2004 shows that heavy drinking of at least 5 drinks in one session at least once per month, is reported by the 10% of the populace. Also 12.2% of the population reports at least one case of intoxication during the last year.

In both men and women, young adults of 18-24 report the highest percentage of alcohol abuse and intoxication.

The frequent consumption of alcohol is especially common in developing agricultural areas, followed by Thessaloniki and the rest of the Urban centres, whilst in the area of the Capital city of Athens the percentage of frequent use of alcohol is smaller. A National probe in 2003 in the student population concerning alcohol and drug use concluded that first in the preference of drinks in adolescents were spirits followed by beer.

Most adolescents, the 67.1%, do know the dangers from daily consumption of 4-5 drinks , whilst the respective percentage for consumption of 5 or more drinks during the weekend, is lowered to 44,9%. The majority of the adolescents seem to understand the connection between alcohol abuse and problems like road accidents, health risks, aggressive behavior, disruption of family relations etc. However, most adolescents also agree that the consumption of alcohol has potentially more positive than negative effects. In addition, in another research about consumer behaviour with alcoholic drinks in 2005, it was shown that first in the preference of the 18-24 young adults is drinks with high alcohol level, like spirits 72,5%.

Regarding prevention of addiction and general health promotion, prevention programs exist not only for drugs abuse but also for alcohol abuse.

As for the school setting, the central application of prevention programs comprise from programs of health promotion. In the school community, there are interventions focused on alcohol consumption that are realized from certain prevention services. Our service does carry out various prevention programs.

Generally the Greek society through the Ministry of Education and Health, has programs that are applied by the respective ministries and deal with prevention and also therapeutic interventions for people who appear to have problems with their use of alcohol.

In addition, regarding the underage youths of 18 years or less, there is specific legislation that forbids the selling and consumption of alcohol in entertainment venues like bars and nightclubs. However it is not adequately enforced, something which is evident from the data of a research showing that 30,7% of adolescents have used alcohol outside their home. Concluding, in 2005 there was a signed agreement from the *Union of Alcohol drinks industry* with the Health ministry. It was an agreement aiming to the protection of consumers and especially the underage drinkers, through the prevention of targeted messages, advertisement and packaging for selling alcohol drinks on under 18's.

As you can see from the data mentioned above there seems to be a great need for prevention in Greece and in the Thessaloniki region. To all this we must add the broader social changes taking place in our country during the last 3 decades considering not only drinking habits but also lifestyle and relationships within the family.

As a Unit specialized in alcohol we tried from the first years of our work, to meet this demand. Very soon we realized that this was a difficult task because we had to cooperate with other community services such as schools and welfare organizations, that didn't always have the issue of alcohol at the top of their priorities. In most cases our partners in Prevention actions seemed to lose their interest after a lecture or a week of events.

In 1997 we organized in Thessaloniki the 3rd *National Meeting of Prevention Services against Addiction*. This was an opportunity to get in touch with Health Promotion Specialists working for the Ministry of Education who had a better understanding of the need and possibilities of the regions school units.

In that way, it became possible to start partnerships that had continuity and stability. Our goal was to work with school units that wished to organize projects that would be creative and involve all parties of school life, like students, teachers and parents. We chose secondary school units from all the parts of the Thessaloniki region. In two cases the school teachers approached us because they felt they were facing problems with alcohol use by their students that they couldn't handle.

With the help of Health Promotion Specialists we organized meetings with Secondary school Teachers. The teachers attended the meetings voluntarily and within their work hours. Our goal was to present our ideas about prevention and listen to them. Through these meetings we found teachers interested in working with us.

Most of these projects that started in 1998 continue until today. We will now give you some more details about what these projects include.

- 1) *Meetings with school teachers.* Every year we meet the teachers that will be involved in the project and also the school principals and sometimes other teachers that want to be present and express their ideas or even their skepticism about the value or the need of such projects. Teachers sometimes worry that talking to students about alcohol will only make matters worse. Our goal is to understand the teachers' worries problems and expectations. We also discuss what they found useful during the past year and what changes they think necessary.
We ask them to present to us in a role playing situations in their every day practice, what they found as difficult to handle.
- 2) *Meetings with Parents.* These meetings are held by the Parents Associations and are of great importance to us. From what we see through our work with families tend to underestimate the risks of alcohol use. Usually few parents participate and mostly mothers . Parents tell us that topics like illegal drugs, school failure and career advising are far more popular. The issues that often arise are the limits they can set and whether their drinking habits and attitude towards alcohol use influence their children.
In meetings with parents and teachers what we try to bring out is that alcohol is not separated from their everyday interaction, converse, and relationships that they develop with their children or students.
- 3) *Meetings with Students.* We meet students from 14 to 17 years of age. In their own classroom when this is possible. (They can also visit us or we can use some other room of the school building). In this way students know each other and feel quite free to exchange views, comments or jokes. We use role playing, pen painting and discussion and try to focus on the information because we believe it to be absolutely necessary as they often show a lack of adequate information and sometimes dangerous misconceptions about important issues on alcohol use and abuse.

A subject that always comes up with the students is the peer pressure to consume alcohol.

We also discuss the myths about alcohol and their own experience. At the end of the meeting, we give the students a questionnaire and ask them to evaluate the project. In most cases they write that they enjoyed, that they found it useful and that they would be interested in participating in similar future projects.

4) Prevention activities organized by the school

Every Year the students are encouraged to organize a prevention intervention such as party , a theatrical play or a prevention campaign of their own. The teachers are usually willing to be part of it but the responsibility is of the students.

Conclusions

As it becomes apparent from our own work, but also from the research data available, the consumption of alcohol , especially in the younger ages, seems to increase and diversify as in the drink of choice and the places where consumption usually takes place. In addition what we see as changing are the habits and practices that are relevant to alcohol consumption and also the relationship that the young people develop with the substance.

But this does not seem to be obvious to the Greek society in general which still maintains attitudes and practices of an older era , of another drinking culture and of a more traditional way of living where alcohol was treated as something beneficial and harmless. the society itself seems to be focused in the issue of illegal drugs when what is also especially in need is

prevention with an emphasis on alcohol and with the aim of 1) raising public awareness 2)
protecting young consumers