

KBS Thematic Meeting:

Community-based prevention of alcohol and drug-related harms

An international research conference on 'Community-based prevention of alcohol and drug-related harms' was held in Vuoranta, Helsinki, in March 2002. The conference was hosted by the Finnish Alcohol and Drug Research Group of Stakes, the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health. The conference was a thematic meeting of the Kettil Bruun Society for Social and Epidemiological Research on Alcohol. Other sponsors of the project include: the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, City of Helsinki, and Alko Inc. The organizing team included Marja Holmila, Thomas Karlsson and Raija Ahtola.

The importance of locally initiated action to prevent problems has a long history and tradition. Such local action has become especially important in the last part of the twentieth century with the rise of free trade agreements and international efforts to remove barriers to the flow of goods across national boundaries and within nations. In the last few decades, research has played an important role in community action by developing knowledge on implementation process and by evaluating the effectiveness of local prevention efforts.

The increased importance of community action efforts to pre-

vent alcohol and drug problems has stimulated true working partnerships across the world between scientists and local practitioners and policy makers. The documentation of these partnerships is critical to more effective prevention in the 21st Century.

The aim of the conference was to further develop the science-based understanding of these processes. The conference was the fifth in the Kettil Bruun Society's series of international research meetings on the topic of community action research and the prevention of alcohol and other drug problems. Even though different prevention projects and research methodologies were discussed in these conferences, many common themes appeared, for example, problems of research methodologies, types of interventions, issues related to the organisation and continuity of prevention work, ownership of the action, partnership between researchers and local persons.

All participants prepared for precirculation and introduced a paper (maximum 16 single-spaces pages) on a relevant topic to the conference theme. Papers were invited to addressing any of the following themes and both methodological and theoretical overviews and concrete examples of studied projects were welcomed:

- The role of research in documentation of the actual success of the community action and its effects in the community
- Institutionalisation of local prevention projects into the community – striving for sustainability
- The relationship between policies and specific programs – how to provide informed community voice input into policy making
- Developing and maintaining community action research partnerships between communities and researchers
- Accumulation of research results – possibilities for evidence-based knowledge

The papers selected for final inclusion in the meeting were circulated among participants prior to the conference. Countries represented included: Australia, Canada, Finland, Italy, Lithuania, New Zealand, Poland, Russia, Sweden, and the United States.

A reception for conference participants was held midway at the House of the Estates, hosted by Director-General Kimmo Leppo, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, and included a presentation on the History of Finland and Helsinki by Professor Matti Klinge.

In a discussion at the end of the conference, 10 factors were iden-

tified based upon the papers presented during the week which contributed to effective community action prevention of alcohol problems. They were:

Local Cultural Values: Community values should be honored and utilized, even while maintaining the essential standards of an evidence-based prevention program design. An over obsession with culture can limit courageous thinking about possible prevention in the local situation, i.e., a belief that a potentially effective strategy can not be implemented. Yet this assumption may never be tested.

Community as a Dynamic System: Effective prevention which engages the entire community as a real system of culture, values, economics, and physical factors has a significant opportunity and a difficult challenge. Local communities, municipalities, and villages are more powerful, are more resourced, more capable than may naturally be believed at the local level in any country.

Media Advocacy or the use of local news: Use of local news as a powerful tool for affecting change but also supporting local ownership of the project. This is often a means to obtain the support of community leaders and not simply change the attitudes and perceptions of the general public alone.

Law Enforcement in local action: Local police and other law enforcement are most effective in

prevention as proactive (deterrence) rather than reactive (arrests and punishment). Effective prevention increases collaboration with police and with the alcohol enforcement agents (liquor licensing, alcohol beverage control agents/authorities).

Support and Partnership between local and nation/state activities: All communities need a true partnership and support from the regional, state, provincial, or national level of government in their respective countries. There are alternative paths: (1) local prevention can be stimulated by national or regional government or ministry initiatives BUT it can not be led at that level or (2) local prevention can be stimulated by local "grass roots" initiatives BUT it must be supported by national or regional government.

Community Leadership and Responsibility: Effective prevention at the local level rests upon the shoulders of leadership taken by the community and the sense of responsibility. Alcohol problems are best seen in the community as a local problem, not something which is brought to the community from the outside.

Central Government Supporting local ability to act: The critical role of central or regional government is not simply a question of providing money to communities but as much a support of local action, i.e., legitimization of independent action.

Local Information (Needs assessment and evaluation of effects): Information from the community about current problems and challenges supports good prevention planning and information/data about changes in problems (outcomes) give information about prevention effectiveness.

Utilization of Evidence-based Strategies: This is the element most often missing from local prevention efforts. Prevention research can provide guidance about potential strategies which have worked elsewhere. Thus looking for strategies which have been tested elsewhere (allowing for cultural differences) is an important ingredient.

Courage and Passion are essential: Effective local prevention is at first dependent upon courage. Community willingness and passion to undertake difficult issues and changes and face sometimes harsh opposition or at best local passiveness (even passive resistance) is a key to effective prevention.

A publication consisting of the papers presented at the conference will be published in 2003 by the Nordic Research community.

The next community alcohol action meeting is tentatively planned for Perth, Australia, in 2005.

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