European prevention researchers call to avoid harmful prevention methods

Prevention methods using shock tactics are proven to be ineffective. Nevertheless, strategies based on predominantly providing information about the dangers of substance use are widespread in Europe. The European Society for Prevention Research (EUSPR) is concerned about those so-called prevention strategies. It calls on decisionmakers, influencers and policymakers to use scientific proof of effectiveness as a criterion for exposing our youth to prevention methods and not to spend public money on rather commercial offers, since there are better and less expensive alternatives.

The so-called shock tactics, controversial forms of informational approaches where strong imagery or testimony (also by ex-substance-users) about the consequences of substance use are conveyed to children and adolescents are ineffective and expensive. Moreover, they may be harmful, leading to reactions that are opposite to those aimed for, e.g. increasing the willingness of certain target groups to try drugs.

There is clear consensus in the scientific world that lack of information or lack of awareness about substance use dangers are not the risk factors leading to drug use or drug problems. Studies on the effect of prevention strategies even show that shock tactics and fear stimulus could

- awake sleeping dogs
- be actually inspiring for those youngsters who are attracted by risk, danger and new sensations.

One of the most marketed examples of such approaches is the Revolution Train. It is a specially-equipped functioning train which guides 12-17 year olds through a touring exhibition on drugs. The children and adolescents are meant to experience the worst outcomes of substance use through appealing audio-visual techniques. It is an example of a prevention strategy that is counter-effective, but builds its sales tactics on satisfaction rates and dissemination volume instead of effectiveness studies.

EUSPR calls on decisionmakers, influencers and policymakers at all levels to use scientific proof of effectiveness as a criterion for exposing our youth to prevention methods. Dissemination of programs or projects that are harmful for the target group should be rejected. Recent tools available to help identifying quality standard interventions are: the European Prevention Curriculum, the Xchange registry and Best Practice Portal, all open source at the European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) and the International Standards of Drug Use Prevention at the United Nations.