

Alcohol and drug misuse sweeping world, says WHO

Susan Mayor *London*

One in four deaths among men aged 15-29 in Europe is now attributable to alcohol, as "binge drinking" penetrates youth culture in both the industrialised and developing world, Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, the director general of the World Health Organization (WHO), told a European ministerial conference on young people and alcohol in Stockholm.

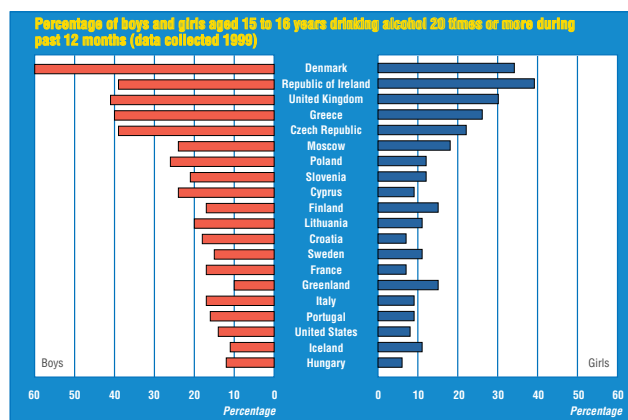
Globally 140 million people now have alcohol dependency, which damages public and private lives, economies, and family life. Dr Brundtland said: "Data from across the world suggests that a culture of sporadic, heavy, or binge drinking among young people may now be increasing also in developing countries. While overall rates of adult per capita consumption are falling in many countries, young people are too often drinking excessive quantities of alcohol to intoxication in a single drinking episode."

Data from a European school survey project on alcohol and other drugs for 1999 presented at the WHO conference showed that smoking, alcohol

use, and use of illicit drugs had increased significantly over the past few years in most European countries.

More than half of the 95 000 teenagers taking part said they had smoked cigarettes at least once. Smoking had increased in most countries, compared with a survey carried out in 1995. Particularly high rates of smoking were reported in the Czech Republic and Lithuania. The survey included an average of 2400 teenagers from each of the 30 European countries taking part. Teenagers aged 15-16 completed questionnaires anonymously in their classrooms, under conditions similar to those for a written test.

The highest smoking rates—based on students reporting that they had smoked on at least 40 occasions—were in Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and Russia, where nearly half of the participants reported this level. Researcher Björn Hibell, director of the Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs, noted: "The overall impression regarding smoking among the [responding students] is that it is a well established habit, showing few signs of diminishing." Smoking rates seemed to be similar in boys and girls in most countries, although they were higher in girls in Denmark, France, Greenland, the Republic of Ireland, Norway, and the United Kingdom. Boys reported higher smoking rates in



Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, and Ukraine.

Use of alcohol was common, particularly in the Czech Republic, Denmark, Ireland, Malta, and the United Kingdom. Alcohol consumption by teenagers seemed to have fallen in only two countries—Italy and Cyprus—where it had been high in 1995. Clear increases were seen in the proportion of students using alcohol in central and eastern Europe, particularly in Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia, and Slovakia. Drinking by Norwegian teenagers had also increased. The highest frequency of alcohol consumption was reported for Denmark—where 59% of the respondents reported drinking alcohol on at least 40 occasions.

Highest rates of drunkenness were reported by students in Denmark, where 41% reported having been drunk 20 times or

more. Finland, Ireland, and the United Kingdom showed the next highest rates, with nearly one in four teenagers indicating that they had been drunk at least 20 times. Boys were much more likely to report having been drunk than girls. Binge drinking (defined as having five or more alcoholic drinks) was most common in Denmark, Ireland, Poland, and the United Kingdom. Dr Hibell noted: "Teenagers tend to follow adult drinking patterns—with greater overall alcohol consumption in southern Europe, but more binge drinking in northern Europe." □

A summary of *The 1999 European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs* is available at www.can.se. Copies can be obtained from CAN, Box 70412, 10725 Stockholm, Sweden (price 450 Swedish kronor plus postage).

US employer agrees to stop genetic testing

Scott Gottlieb *New York*

A US freight railway company has agreed to stop requiring the genetic testing of employees who file claims for a wrist condition called the carpal tunnel syndrome. The US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission had filed a lawsuit against Burlington Northern Santa Fe alleging that the policy violated the Americans With Disabilities Act.

A railway worker who refused to provide a blood sample after filing an injury claim was threatened with dismissal, the commission said, in its first

legal challenge against genetic testing by employers. A spokesman for Burlington Northern, Richard Russack, told the US federal court that it would stop the testing for 60 days "to evaluate the situation."

The debate over biological screening in the workplace has intensified as scientists unravel the human genetic code, but the controversy has largely been theoretical so far. As a result of the lawsuit filed by the employment commission, Burlington Northern has become one of the first companies to acknowledge having used genetic testing on its employees, according to the commission's lawyers.

Concern that such tests could be used to weed out workers on the basis of their genetic predispositions to injury or disease has led 22 states to ban the

use of genetic screening for making employment related decisions, according to a survey by the *Washington Post*.

The commission alleged that the blood sample that the employees were asked to submit was used to identify a genetic defect on chromosome 17, which some experts believe could predispose a person to forms of the carpal tunnel syndrome. The syndrome causes numbness and weakness in the wrist.

The commission also alleged that employees were not informed of the genetic test or asked to give their consent.

Mr Russack said that his company in some instances requested employees to undergo genetic tests "because there could be a predisposition within the body chemistry of the individual" to develop the carpal

tunnel syndrome "that had nothing to do with work." But he said that such tests were not required and there had been no disciplinary action or threat of such action against any worker who refused the tests.

Reliance on such tests is controversial, and the law governing their use is unsettled. There are worries that workers subjected to such tests will face illegal discrimination and invasions of privacy.

A year ago, president Clinton signed an executive order prohibiting federal departments and agencies from making employment decisions based on protected genetic information. Recently three Democrat members of congress introduced legislation to prohibit the use of genetic information as a basis for discrimination in employment and in health insurance. □