

Cllr. Jim Corr, Chairman of ECAD addressing the 17th Mayors' Conference in Gozo, Malta, 23-25 September 2010

Introduction

It is my honour and pleasure to welcome delegates from various parts of Europe to the 17th ECAD Mayors' Conference.

Let me at the outset thank sincerely the Parliamentary Secretariat for Public Dialogue and information within the office of the Prime Minister of Malta and also the Pembroke Local Council for organizing the 2010 Conference, selecting a most appropriate theme - "Empowering our Citizens to Healthier Lifestyles" - seeking out a group of highly-informed speakers and providing us with the enchanting ambiance of the Island of Gozo as the location for our 17th Mayors' Conference.

The Organisation

ECAD - a non-profit organisation is now in existence for just over 17th years. It aims to promote and develop, through democratic means the fight against illicit drugs and we do so by providing experience and up-to-date knowledge about the drug problem at local, national and international levels.

Running an international organisation in the Europe of 2010 is a difficult and demanding task. Recession and financial insecurity have compelled governments and cities to prioritise expenditures and in some cases, financial provisions for combating the destructive human consequences arising from experimentation with illicit drugs are deemed to be discretionary expenditure which maybe cut back.

Quality of Life

However, maintaining a reasonable quality of life for our citizens must be high-up on our city agenda and the theme of this year's Conference asks us to focus on "Empowering our Citizens to Healthier Lifestyles".

Many of us present at this Conference have the honour of representing our cities/towns as Mayors, Deputy Mayors and City Officials. We are all well aware of the economic and social difficulties which impinge on the lives of our citizens.

We know that individual persons and families are unhappy because of high unemployment levels, or bad housing or social exclusion.

As public representatives we strive on a daily basis to respond to such social concerns. However, we are also clearly aware of the fact that the use of illicit drugs by some of our citizens has health and social consequences for the individuals, their families and, in many cases, their communities e.g. the exhortation from the people in Bray, Co. Dublin to “help us fight the scourge of drug dealing in our community. It happens day and night. It happens everywhere.”

The drug trade continues to be one of the most significant challenges facing cities right across our European homeland.

We, in ECAD, are very well aware of the reality on the ground and how the drug scene has changed and changed utterly since the foundation of ECAD over 17 years ago.

Head Shops

In my country, a vociferous debate is at present occurring regarding the growing numbers of shops who are selling legal alternatives to drugs like cocaine, ecstasy and cannabis.

This issue centres on alternative lifestyle shops known as “Head Shops”.

The chemicals they offer are not illegal under current Irish legislation and the fact that they are often sold as “herbal products” gives them a much more acceptable status.

However, the purchase of a product from the Head Shop in County Durham in the U.K. resulted in a teenage boy being hospitalised with psychotic symptoms and the discovery by doctors of a new “legal” drug in his bloodstream named Mephedrone. This incident kicked-off a national panic in Britain last year and alerted the authorities to the dangers of Mephedrone, a drug made in labs in China and Eastern Europe to mimic the effects of cocaine and ecstasy.

The Head Shops in my country also warn that the pills and powders being sold are not safe for human consumption and this allows them to by-pass consumer protection legislation.

Despite these warnings, sales are increasing in such shops and a growing organisation of parents, teachers and politicians is calling for action. The form that that action should take is a matter for in-depth discussion because there is a possibility that closing down head shops may simply push the whole market underground and add another layer to the illegal drug trade.

The use of new psychoactive substances and new patterns of drug use can have important public health and policy implications.

Difficult to Detect

They are however, difficult to detect because typically, they first emerge at low levels and in specific locations or among restricted subgroups of the population.

Few countries have monitoring systems that are sensitive to new phenomena in the drug field and methodological difficulties to detect them are considerable.

Nonetheless, ECAD believes that the need to identify potential new threats in drugs is a prerequisite for progress in our ongoing battle to protect people.

The European Union's early warning system provides a quick response mechanism to the emergence of new psychoactive substances on the drug market.

This system has been in place since 1997 but was strengthened in 2005 by a council decision.

That Council decision on new psychoactive substances established a mechanism for the rapid exchange of information on new psychoactive substances that may pose public health and social threats.

It also provides the possibility to trigger a formal risk assessment process, the findings of which may lead to a political decision to place new substances under control across the European Union.

Early Warning

The activities to support the early-warning system are part of the work of the European Monitoring Committee for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) and fit within a broader perspective of using a wide variety of data sources to improve the timeliness and sensitivity of the European Drug Monitoring System.

ECAD's Director, Jorgen Sviden, is working closely with EMCDDA with a view to having the most up-to-date information available to our member cities on this changing world of emerging substances.

The Internet

Another sea change which has occurred since ECAD was founded in 1993 has been the emergence of the Internet as a new market place for psychoactive substances, providing retailers with the opportunity of offering for sale alternatives to controlled drugs.

The online market place has implications for the potential to increase the availability of psychoactive substances and monitoring it is an increasingly important element of identifying new drug trends. It is, of course, also necessary to focus on the risks

associated with the substances offered for sale such as the new synthetic drugs and two plant substances - Kava and Kratom reported to EMCDDA in 2008.

Information about new products is needed by both the users and the professionals including clinical toxicologists, poison control specialists and those working in the drugs' field.

Changing Scene

It is obvious then that the milieu in which ECAD operates today is so different to the tasks which predominated its activities in the early 1990's.

However, ECAD, while not having the capacity to organise the anti-drug programme in any one city, strives to spread best practice and to encourage and facilitate cooperation between the member cities.

The feed-back we get from a variety of cities and towns advocates a partnership approach between statutory agencies and the community and voluntary sectors and to pursue their work under 5 pillars of strategy:-

- **Supply Reduction**
- **Prevention**
- **Treatment**
- **Rehabilitation**
- **Research**

Across all pillars we must maintain the focus on the welfare of the individual person, his/her family and local communities. My experience leads me to support families of the problem drug users and also to involve them in rehabilitative efforts.

In relation to the problem drug users themselves, ECAD firmly believes that every effort should be made to empower them to access the social, economic and cultural benefits of life in line with their needs and aspirations.

ECAD is a person-centred organisation continually exhorting its member cities/towns to provide people with the most up-to-date information on the dangers associated with drug experimentation whether the drug comes from the drug dealer on the corner of the street, from the Head Shop or over the Internet. But when the person succumbs to the love of drugs, we must help him or her to return to a normal life in keeping with the dignity of the human person.

Commitment

We rejoice in the fact men and women across Europe are working on a daily basis to promote the ideals of ECAD and new ECAD offices in Riga (Latvia), Bourgas (Bulgaria) and St. Petersburg (Russia) are vibrant centres where new cities are recruited,

opinion-building through cooperation with local media is pursued and such regional offices ensure that ECAD has representation at national and international events.

The Youth in Europe Project is now in its fifth year and has to date achieved so much in empowering families and mobilising society for effective prevention programmes.

We thank Reykjavik and its coordinator Jon Sigfusson for driving this Youth Programme in a most professional way.

The Irish-born philosopher and British parliamentarian, Edmund Burke said:

“All that is necessary for evil to prevail is that good men should do nothing”.

Let us renew our commitment to the ideals of ECAD so that mental and physical destruction surreptitiously inflicted on our fellow citizens by evil people will be seen by all Europeans to be an unacceptable feature of European life in the 21st Century.