

European Drugs Conference, Drug abuse prevention in the information age

Statement by Professor H. Ghodse, President of the
International Narcotics Control Board
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset, I would like to emphasize the importance for this commendable initiative that has been taken to discuss one of the most important aspects in addressing the drug problem- its prevention.

The International Narcotics Control Board as the watchdog of the international drug control conventions has reiterated that the objectives of the conventions cannot be reached without continuous efforts in the field of drug abuse prevention. In its Annual Report for 1993, the Board urged Governments to give a higher priority to reducing the demand for illicit drugs. Activities to reduce the illicit demand for drugs are an obligation for Governments under all international drug control conventions. Prevention has been recognized as important. Nevertheless, for many years, drug abuse prevention activities were short-term very often ad hoc initiatives, underfunded and thus ineffective.

I am optimistic that this situation will change now. At the Special Session of the General Assembly in June 1998, Governments adopted the first international instrument which is devoted exclusively to the reduction of the demand for illicit drugs, the demand reduction declaration. With the adoption of that declaration, the international community has a globally accepted set of principles and standards at its disposal and the INCB, within its mandate will look into how far Governments are able to translate them into effective actions.

Young people do not simply "choose" to use drugs. They are greatly influenced by their environment. In Europe, more often than not their environment is characterized by an abundance of messages which are benevolent or even favourable towards drug use. Young people see that their favourite pop stars or actors not only indulge in drug use in their private lives but also widely proclaim the virtues of certain drugs. When surfing on the Internet, they are confronted with a multitude of messages, many of which favour drug abuse. Regrettably, children in the European Union may thus grow up in an environment where drug abuse is sometimes portrayed as a quaint hobby for people with too much time on their hands.

Today's society, particularly in the European Union, has become an information society. The advances in technology have profoundly changed the way individuals interact, entertain themselves, obtain information and communicate. Information technology has been woven into the fabric of economic and social life. The global information society is a fact, a fact which has to be considered when devising drug abuse prevention strategies.

The Internet is a powerful medium for expressing opinions to a large, predominantly young, audience. Governments should not leave this opportunity to individuals and groups who advocate changes in drug policy. Governments should make use of the Internet to offer factual and accurate information on drugs. Many authorities in the European Union are already present on the Internet and offer such services and the Board fully supports those initiatives.

On the other hand, the Internet should not become an area without laws where everything is permitted, and where website owners encourage people to break the law in their respective countries. Illegal subject matter needs to be removed from the Internet and Governments should seek the cooperation from the telecommunications industries and software providers in removing it from the Internet.

Informing young people about the dangers of drug abuse is necessary but, in itself, not sufficient to prevent the onset of drug abuse. Young people themselves must learn to think critically and analyse pro-drug messages in the environment. They must be able to develop personal and social skills to uncover misleading information about drugs and to resist other pro-drug influences.

Such skills are best developed in comprehensive life skills training programmes which equip adolescents to deal with the challenges of adolescent life. These include self-improvement skills such as goal setting and self-reinforcement, making decisions and solving problems, thinking critically and analysing media messages, coping with anxiety, communicating effectively, meeting people and making friends, and assertiveness.

Ideally, these drug abuse prevention programmes should be implemented before children have been exposed to pro-drug messages. Attitudes are, after all, formed at an early age and are influenced at various stages of a child's development by parents, teachers, peers and other potential role models. Prevention programmes must be implemented from elementary school onward. And they must be sustained. A time-limited poster or television campaign, or school education slot has little or no weight against a continuous barrage of messages which are positive on recreational use of drugs. Experience has indicated that the involvement of parents - and possibly peers - and the continuity of drugs education into secondary schools are also important if drug use is to be reduced.

Carefully targeted skills-based prevention programmes have been shown to be most successful in preventing drug use and subsequent abuse. This brings us to another problem-- the evaluation of such prevention programmes. Unfortunately, many demand reduction activities suffer from under-evaluation so that in the end it is not possible to determine whether the programme has been successful or not. Therefore, key quantifiable indicators must be agreed on **before** a demand reduction project is implemented. Control groups are also essential in order to obtain a comprehensive picture. Carefully designed evaluation procedures will help considerably in the assessment of outcomes of prevention programmes and can be adjusted to work better in the future. Should the programme show disappointing results, it has to be reconsidered. Actors in demand reduction should

not be afraid to admit to failure. It would be a grave mistake to carry on with certain programmes just because they sound good or are popular with the general public.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I trust that this conference is a new impulse towards innovative and effective Pan-European drug prevention policies.

Thank you for your attention.