



EHFG 2011: TOBACCO EXPERT CALLS FOR COMPLETE EU BAN

Prof Kari Reijula, a pioneer of tobacco legislation in Finland, today called for a road map to a tobacco-free Europe. And speaking to the same EHFG workshop, Austrian Euro-MP Karin Kadenbach accused tobacco companies of “sneakily” using additives to increase addiction, especially among the young and called for a ban on suspect additives.

Bad Hofgastein, October 7, 2011 – Prof Kari Reijula of Helsinki University today, speaking at the European Health Forum Gastein, called for a road map to a tobacco-free Europe to encourage the Commission to go further. “Smoke-free or tobacco-free societies are the most important measures and should be introduced by governments all over Europe,” he said, comparing legislation with that on asbestos in the workplace. “In tobacco-free societies adolescents find out the smokeless life is not only much healthier but also cooler.”

Finland’s much-admired anti-smoking legislation had needed to be extended to a total prohibition, in 2004, of smoking in restaurants and bars: “With that, exposure to tobacco smoke in restaurants has practically ended. Only a total ban was found to be effective,” Prof Reijula criticised health professionals for failing to promote non-smoking: “Two thirds of smokers would like to quit, but according to a recent survey only 40% of personnel in health care proposed smoking cessation to the smoker over the last 12 months”. He also took a swipe at lobbyists promoting ‘snus’ chewing tobacco, especially popular in Sweden. “Tobacco companies have been very active in promoting their products,” he said. “It should finally be recognized that oral tobacco is a serious health hazard as well”.

Tobacco companies “deliberately boosting addiction”

World Health Organisation figures show smoking now kills more people than Aids, legal drugs, illegal drugs, road accidents, murder and suicide combined, Socialist MEP and Environment and Public Health Committee member Karin Kadenbach told the Pfizer sponsored workshop. It was time to get tough with the tobacco companies, and for European governments to make a consolidated effort to deal with “this modern scourge.”

“The time for just talking about this really is over”, she told the meeting, citing the authoritative report in March by EQUIPP (Europe Quitting: Progress & Pathway) that tobacco remained the principal cause of death in Europe – responsible for some 650,000 deaths a year – and cost European economies 1% of its total GDP. Continuing use of seductive tobacco additives was “sneaky” and should be banned, she said.

One of her immediate concerns was that tobacco companies put varying quantities of additives into cigarettes – up to 10% of a cigarette by weight - to make them taste and smell as seductive as possible. “This is sneaky. But what about the additives which make cigarettes

addictive? It verges on the sinister, especially when we consider how many children are addicted, and have become the main source of market growth in the developing world.”

As a minimum there needed to be more research into the lead taken by Oregon Health and Science University in the US in examining ammonia and urea additives. “These were found to increase so-called ‘free-base’ nicotine levels, and deliver nicotine to the brain more quickly – something scientists know helps make cigarettes more addictive,” said the Euro-MP.

As long ago as 1997 research confirmed the American Food and Drug Administration view that widespread use of ammonia was evidence that the industry was manipulating the way cigarettes delivered nicotine. “This is obviously an area in which we need to work together,” said the Euro-MP. “If we are to get anywhere the European Commission has a vital role to play in coordinating trans-national efforts. Meanwhile I think additives should simply be banned, and I hope this will be part of the European Commission’s revised Directive on Tobacco Products, due by the end of this year.”

Austria: Poor performance

In Austria the smoking problem is severe. The EQUIPP (Europe Quitting: Progress and Pathways) report, initiated and funded by Pfizer and launched in March, found that not only that 34% of Austrians smoked, but that smoking among young people had actually boomed since 1986. Austrian progress on tobacco control was ranked 30th and joint bottom (with Greece) of European countries in the 2010 Tobacco Control Scale report. EQUIPP found the Austrian legislation ‘particularly lenient’ compared to other EU countries. The minimum age for buying cigarettes remains 16. In most of Europe it is 18. As for smoke-free legislation, the report states: ‘Not enforced in Austria.’ The EQUIPP report provides six key recommendations for improving smoking cessation infrastructure in the country.

The EHFG is the most important conference on health care policy in the EU. This year it attracted more than 600 decision-makers from 45 countries for discussions on the latest developments in health care policy.

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