



## **Workplace Health Promotion in Europe: A Call to Network**

*Despite the wide-spread knowledge available in Europe on best practice in Workplace Health Promotion (WHP) the readiness to learn from one another is not yet particularly well developed. A project run by the European Network for WHP seeks to change this situation.*

When it comes to identifying successful ways and means of promoting health and well-being at workplaces, European states stick mainly to their own methods. This is surprising really, because the advantages and benefits of quality-assured WHP are comprehensively documented all over the continent. Taking a look beyond national borders is therefore a worthwhile option when it comes to achieving more success with WHP initiatives at home. There are a multitude of studies and good practical examples from other European countries to show how healthy design of working processes and incentives for health-conscious behaviour lead to lower sickness-related absenteeism and higher motivation and productivity. Considering the profit to the national economies and welfare funds in the member states resulting from the added value to companies and the lower levels of stress for individuals, the benefits of WHP to society as a whole cannot be denied. However, apart from a few exceptions such as Finland, politicians, company and social decision makers nearly everywhere in Europe are still hesitant to implement more health-management initiatives in enterprises and organisations.

Opinions still differ on how to achieve the necessary change in outlook and on how to disseminate WHP more broadly. Are legal regulations worthwhile that put enterprises under pressure to assume more responsibility for the health of their employees? Or should there be more incentives such as the quality certificates existing in Austria, England and the Netherlands, or even bonus schemes such as those in Germany that have been in place since the beginning of the year? According to the Luxembourg Declaration of 1997, the maxim should be: "Conviction rather than normative pressure". According to this generally accepted European declaration of principle, one of the most decisive preconditions for successful WHP is voluntarily participation. Successful



persuasion however relies on the exchange of ideas and experience to reveal exemplary models of good practice, to encourage their use and to stimulate mutual learning.

True to this motto, since 1996 an extensive collection of successful models of good practice from all countries and economic areas has been gathered by the European Network for Workplace Health Promotion ENWHP, the secretariat of which is based at the Federal Association of Company Health Insurance Funds (BKK) in Germany. This process is in keeping with the European Union health strategy and the subsequent current programme of action which mentions improvements to the standard of information and knowledge in the field of public health as one of its most important targets. In the current programme that runs until 2008, the Commission has undertaken to support activities that are innovative and practicable. The benchmarking-approach therefore supports the work of those networks in particular whose purpose is to determine “best practices” and to encourage their use.

During the course of its fourth joint initiative and with the support of the EU Commission General Direction Health and Consumer Protection, the ENWHP has been working since 2002 to identify or establish national networks, forums and similar groups in the field of workplace health promotion and to link them together. In a project lasting more than two years, a pan European network has been created, bringing together and integrating interested protagonists on all levels. As one example for this development, the *German Network for Workplace Health Promotion* was set up in 2003. This forum deals with existing and future challenges to health at work in various fields of activity and is financed by the BKK Federal Association and the HVBG (Federation of Institutions for Statutory Accident Insurance and Prevention). It co-operates with the relevant Federal Ministries and is open to anyone interested. Similar platforms for exchange and co-operation have successfully been established in 13 countries, although their working methods are quite different. In a further eight countries, the so called National forums” are under development.

Of course the development of a formal organisational foundation is not enough in itself. To push ahead changes in attitude, convincing answers on questions of substance are essential: *Why* should enterprises (and national social security organisations) invest in WHP? And furthermore, *how* should this take place? During the project and parallel to the



forum initiative, the European Network is therefore developing both a European pool of arguments that justify initiatives for WHP, and a collection of instruments that have successfully been employed in member states, accession countries, and countries of the European economic area. This type of *toolbox* will increase knowledge on exemplary methods significantly and simplify the practical work in workplace health promotion considerably.

The results of this project will be presented at the fourth European Network conference on 14<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> June 2004 that will be held to finalise the ENWHP joint initiative. It will take place during the Irish EU Presidency in Dublin and is supported by the European Commission, the Irish Ministry of Health and the BKK Federal Association. The conference in Dublin will act as an initial platform for the exchange of experience between the national forums and at the same time will contribute in deepen the transfer of knowledge throughout all the counties. This can only be beneficial for the further dissemination of WHP in Europe.

**Links:**

- *European Network ENWHP:* [www.enwhp.org](http://www.enwhp.org)
- *German Network for Workplace Health Promotion::* [www.dnbqf.org](http://www.dnbqf.org)
- *European WHP Conference in Dublin:* [www.whpdublin2004.org](http://www.whpdublin2004.org)
- *Workplace Health Promotion and Prevention at the BKK Federal Association:*  
[www.bkk.de/gesundheit](http://www.bkk.de/gesundheit)
- *The EU Commission's Action programme:*  
[http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/health/ph\\_programme/programme\\_en.htm](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/health/ph_programme/programme_en.htm)

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