



Workplace Health

European Co-operation Projects Promote Healthy Work

In a united and largely barrier-free Europe a look beyond one's own borders and the European exchange of experience, also in the field of workplace health promotion, help to identify one's own problems and develop successful solution strategies. The BKK Bundesverband has been involved for years at European level in the field of company health policy. Social security funds and the insured also profit from this in addition to companies.

When it's a matter of identifying successful ways of promoting health and wellbeing at the workplace, it is still largely national strategies that are being pursued in Europe. Amazing actually, for at first glance problems and challenges in the member states are readily comparable, notwithstanding the differences in their social and economic development. The rise in pressure from competition and the sectoral shifts in the structure of the economy have put the labour markets and social security systems under considerable pressure almost everywhere in Europe - with far-reaching consequences for the world of work and the situation of the workers. Downsizing, new forms of work such as telework, temporary agency and freelance work as well as the increasing pressure from time and productivity - to mention just a few of the new phenomena - have considerably increased the health strains on the employees. In almost all countries of the old continent the time bomb of over-ageing workforces is ticking: Eighteen of the world's twenty countries with the highest proportion of old people are in the European region of the WHO.

If one recalls the host of different solution strategies dealing with the changes in the world of work and their influences on the workers, a view beyond one's own borders



opens up new perspectives. However, in a field which has largely escaped regulation from Brussels this look is still often clouded by the individual characteristics of national health systems. National survey methods, for example to determine the costs of work-related sickness, or establish the time lost due to sickness still differ considerably from each other. Differences in the relevant statutory provisions, for example the lists of recognised occupational diseases, barely permit reliable comparisons.

Furthermore, the willingness to learn from one another - when it's a question of successful procedures in workplace health promotion (WHP) - is only evolving slowly. There are a wealth of studies and positive case examples in the individual countries which prove how the health design of workflows can be improved and how incentives for a health-conscious behaviour can be used successfully. The European expertise on good practice of workplace health promotion, however, still remains largely isolated.

The EU Commission, provided with only limited responsibilities when it comes to the health of Europe's citizens, has recognised these shortcomings and made an improvement in the level of information and knowledge in the field of public health a priority objective. This also means an improved level of knowledge on the relationship between work and health. The Commission has for some time now nailed its colours to the mast in that it wants to determine, with the aid of a benchmarking approach, innovative and proven procedures, so-called "best practices", and encourage people to copy them, also and above all in the world of work.

As a partner of the EU Commission, the BKK Bundesverband has also been working for years with other European social insurance institutions and other players in WHP to advance the intensive documentation of the data base and the exchange of European knowledge based on experience and in this way to improve the conditions for promoting health at the workplace.

The BKK Bundesverband has gained a reputation over many years as an expert for the importance of work for health, e.g. through the long tradition of the health reports relating to the world of work. The BKK BV was assigned in 2002 to co-ordinate the



European project **WORKHEALTH** to develop indicators valid throughout Europe reflecting the importance of the world of work for public health.

As a sponsor of the secretariat of the European Network for Workplace Health Promotion **ENWHP**, the BKK Bundesverband has already been making an important contribution since 1996 towards the establishment of a comprehensive collection with successful case examples and methods from all countries and economic sectors. For example, European knowledge on methods and practical examples worth copying has been greatly extended. In order to further advance the necessary change in awareness in Europe, the ENWHP began in 2002, under the auspices of the BKK Bundesverband, to identify or set up national networks, forums and comparable action groups in the field of workplace health promotion and network these groups. In this way a pan-European network of so-called "national forums" was created which unites and integrates interested players at all levels. At present, the network is involved in collecting successful strategies and methods which will ensure workers in Europe that they can remain longer in gainful employment.

In addition to the partnership with the Commission, the Bundesverband is also involved in other co-operation projects at European level.

- Together with other European social insurance institutions, it works in the network **Social Insurance for Health** on identifying, evaluating and disseminating strategies and practices of social insurance institutions in the fields of health promotion, prevention and rehabilitation, which make a contribution towards increasing the efficiency of these institutions and therefore towards improving public health.
- Together with the Bertelsmann Foundation, the BKK BV set up the network **Enterprise for Health** (EfH) in order to promote the exchange of information and experience between exemplary companies and to disseminate successful approaches in company health policy and corporate culture based on partnership. At present, 20 well-known companies from different branches and 14 countries belong to the network which, under the chairpersonship of EfH President Rita Süssmuth, devotes its efforts towards developing a corporate culture based on partnership and a modern company health policy.



With its international commitment, the BKK Bundesverband has played a decisive role over the past ten years in achieving the following:

- A specific WHP model "*made in Europe*" has crystallised. With the *Luxembourg Declaration* passed by the ENWHP in 1997, a keynote declaration which has now achieved general recognition, a uniform understanding of workplace health promotion was developed for the first time in the European Union. This model is based on the European social model, it has an interdisciplinary nature and actively includes employees. As a result, this understanding differs from comparable developments in other regions. In contrast to the USA, for example where health management is primarily geared to risk factors and is dominated by an individualistic approach, European intervention is characterised by a high level of consensus orientation and participation.
- A European infrastructure for WHP has been created which networks exchange and co-operation platforms in over 20 countries. This also includes a European collection of successful tools and methods (toolbox).
- European indicators on the importance of the world of work have been developed which are to be incorporated into a future European health reporting system. To intensify the pooling of the wealth of projects which are currently being implemented as part of the action programme of the European Community to develop this reporting system, the Commission has set up so-called working groups. The BKK Bundesverband was put in charge of the Task Force "*Work & Health*".
- The subject of WHP has gradually climbed to the top of the political agenda. For the first time, the Commission listed in its action plan this year health promotion at the workplace as an important objective of European policy in the field of public health. The EU Commissioner responsible Kyriakou now sees in the workplace an "*important tool to improve health within the EU*" (see also adjacent interview).

This development also benefits the company health insurance and the workers insured:



- In this way the specific features of one's own country can be determined in comparisons of the situation in the various member states and tailor-made recommendations derived from them - e.g. with regard to what role the work setting can play in the prevention of illnesses and in the development of health resources. To this extent the results of this project will again be channelled directly into the health promoting activities of the BKK Bundesverband.
- With the support of the European network activities the company health insurance funds identify international, proven procedures and successful methods in prevention and health promotion which may also help German companies. The statutory health insurance saves money through the healthy design of the workflows and the resultant reduced use of medical and rehabilitative services and therefore the insured and the employers, too.
- The exchange of experience and European networking has considerably simplified the practical work for all German players in WHP, too. Access to the *German Network for Workplace Health Promotion* DNGBF, which was formed as a direct result of the European networking, offers a national platform for actively participating in the further development of WHP in Germany. The forum jointly sponsored by the BKK Bundesverband and the *Central Federation of the Industrial Berufsgenossenschaften (HVBG - German Institutions for Statutory Accident Insurance and Prevention)*, which co-operates with the federal ministries responsible and is open to anyone interested, tackles different fields of action with the present and future challenges to health at the workplace.

Finally, the greater dissemination of WHP, its political upgrading and European networking results in benefits for society as a whole. The findings evaluated in the European projects and the practical experience collected from different countries unanimously show that every euro invested in workplace health promotion leads to greater quality of life for the employees as well as to substantially higher social and economic earnings. The innovation capability and productivity of companies increase, the health system saves money. However, the number of those who have introduced



WHP is still low. Therefore, the BKK Bundesverband will in future undertake the following at European level:

- devote itself to improving lifestyle-related health promotion at the workplace. In a new project which the network has proposed to the Commission, the ENWHP will advocate the identification of successful methods in the sectors smoking prevention, nutrition, exercise and mental health and the promotion of healthy behaviour at the workplace in 25 countries.
- work in a follow-up project to ensure the application of the knowledge gained as part of WORKHEALTH and make it an integral part of a future European health report. Social insurance data are also to be included in the evaluation for the first time.
- boost and organise the exchange of experience among high-ranking company representatives. In the autumn the EfH network will be organising a management conference in Berlin with representatives from Board and specialist levels at the European companies involved.

If WHP is really to produce results, the voluntary action of those involved is a crucial precondition, according to the contents of generally recognised principles of the Luxembourg Declaration. However, PR work lives from the sharing of ideas and experience which identifies examples of good practice, supports others to follow suit and in this way encourages reciprocal learning. To achieve this is a national and European task.

Annex:

Links:

- European network ENWHP: www.enwhp.org
- German Network for Workplace Health Promotion: www.dnbgf.org
- Brochure "Arbeitsweltbezogene Gesundheitsberichterstattung in Europa", which can be requested at workhealth@bkk-bv.de



- Action programme of the EU Commission in the public health sector:
http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/health/ph_programme/programme_de.htm
- www.enterprise-for-health.org

Julia Kreis and Dr. Thomas Theuringer work in the field of European Health Promotion at the Federal Association for Company Health Insurance Funds, in Essen / Germany.