

# The possibilities of drug prevention

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Many international studies have shown that education projects fail to reduce the use of drugs in target groups. The general impression is that the affects of such programmes are weak and short lived. Such feedback has kindled negative discussion in the past few years. People feel helpless and frustrated, but also have begun to oppose or question the views of the researchers.

Investing in education and campaigns is still a politically wise decision. Politicians and authorities can show that they are concerned and doing something. How they appear is at times more important than what is actually achieved. Campaigning can provide an illusion of determination as well as positive publicity.

Estimated studies measure the success of such programmes with relatively few meters. The most common meter is whether those who have received drug education use less drugs than those who have not. This is an important result, but more versatile goals should be established for prevention work. Does an experimenter stop using drugs? If not, will preventive messages stop them from moving to another? Can they avoid becoming a problem user, and if not, can they look for help or put an end to their drug use in other ways? Can they be protected from other harms?

The scientifically based education nihilism has been criticised in Finland since the 1980's. The theory of motivating education attempts to redirect research to look for those effects of prevention that cannot be detected by measuring the 'before' and 'after' stages and changes in behaviour.

The new target of education was to be the climate of opinions. Importance was found in the interpretations and assessments that could evoke on a level of the general opinion. The affects of messages were seen in their ability to kindle reactions, thoughts, insights during private and public discussions at breakfast table, in bars, as well as, in the media. The educator does not inject, but kindles a fire and sees to it that there is plenty of good-quality wood available. The people around the fire use it for their own needs, some roast sausages, others dry socks.

Drug education can, in other words, have a profound and lasting affect on how we think and act. It cannot, however, make people think and act a way that is pre-planned.

Researcher Matti Piispa puts it aptly: "individual acts of prevention should be thought of as droplets that do not produce visible and immediate results, but that together with countless other droplets can in time form a stream that will reshape the Finnish intoxicant scenery".

An example of what preventive messages can set in motion can be found in the recent study by Pekka Hakkarainen, "Tupakka nautinnosta ongelmaksi" ("Tobacco - from pleasure to problem"). It tells of a prevention education campaign that for its part changed the way we think in a short period of time. The successful strategy included a determined separation from the earlier moralising opposition of smoking, using scientific information and appealing to people's sense of justice that was being violated by the ways in which the tobacco industry operated. The health front succeeded because it was able to smartly read the signs of the times and find arguments that appealed to people. The same aptness is needed now so that drug prevention can be a part of the cultural change instead of a hopeless attempt to block it.

It is impossible to imagine a form of education that would not try to prepare the young for the choices and situations they will face in their lives. It is seldom asked whether educating the young about laws and justice is worthwhile when some adolescents commit crimes, or whether there should be less education on traffic rules as some adolescents will still be involved in accidents. We don't think that health education is less important because we know about the shortcomings in the dietary and health habits of the young. In fact it makes health education more important. Education on intoxicants is an equally important part of the upbringing of the young.

We as a society want to provide our adolescents with the best possible facilities and resources for life through their upbringing and education. Of course, this does not mean that any kind of intoxicant education should be allowed. On the contrary, seeing intoxicant education as part of upbringing sets its own conditions to the education.

The ideal of individual freedom, which is the basis for liberal western society, can only come true if there is information on

the consequences of the choices of individuals. Philosopher John Stuart Mill's famous carriage metaphor turns around the populist concern that informing people of the facts supposedly means patronising them. In the metaphor a passenger is approaching a collapsed bridge and Mills asks if an authority or another bystander has the right to stop them in order to inform them of the situation. 'Liberty consists in doing what one desires', Mills says. Freedom is possible if the individual achieves what they want through their actions, while avoiding consequences that they do not want. It is alright to stop the journey of the traveller because one does not want to end up on the bottom of the river, but to cross it. One's freedom actually requires that we stop him/her.

Education and the dissemination of information produce western citizenship that lives up to our ideals if they themselves fulfil the requirements of the same ideals.

**Markku Soikkeli**

Senior researcher,

National Institute for Welfare and Health

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Matti Piispa: Alkoholi, huumeet ja media. Viisi tapaustutkimusta päihdevalistuksen mahdollisuuksista ("Alcohol, drugs and the media. Five case studies on the possibilities of drug prevention"). Publications by the Finnish Centre for Health Promotion 9/99.

Pekka Hakkarainen: Tupakka nautinnosta ongelmaksi ("Tobacco - from pleasure to problem"), Vastapaino 2000.

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