

NICOTINE FREE EUROPE IS UTOPIA

The Europe's Beating Cancer Plan presented by the European Commission on 3 February 2021 foresees the achievement of a tobacco-free Europe. Since the publication of the Cancer Plan, statements were made by the representative of the Commission¹ as well as the Member States which fully support the outlined objective. Even further, during the March informal videoconference of the Ministers of Health, Hungary supported the goal of the Commission. In addition, it encouraged the move towards the nicotine free Europe. Whereas the ambition to address addictions amongst European citizens is a step in the right direction, the objective of the Commission to ensure the addiction-free Europe is political and disregards scientific reality. A world without addictions is utopia and a solid body of scientific evidence already exists which firmly supports that statement.

Why is the nicotine-free Europe unachievable?

Politicians have for a long time advocated for abstinence as the only acceptable approach to addictions. Nonetheless, a society free of addiction or drug use is an unrealistic political goal. The reality is that the ambitions of politicians to achieve Europe without addictions is a castle in the sky, especially when confronted with those citizens who cannot, or do not want to stop using addictive substances. This inability to enforce science causes more harm than good.

1. Addiction is a comprehensive phenomenon

Addiction is a cluster of physiological, behavioral, and cognitive phenomena. Understanding that addiction has this fundamental biological component, may help explain the difficulty of achieving and maintaining abstinence without treatment.

Individuals, every day, are subject to psychological stress from work, family problems, psychiatric illness, pain associated with medical problems, social clues (such as meeting individuals from one's drug-using circle), or environmental clues (such as encountering streets, objects, or even smells associated with drug abuse). All of these can, and do, trigger intense cravings for substances such as alcohol, nicotine, or illicit drugs,² without the individual even being consciously aware of the triggering event. Any of the mentioned factors can hinder attainment of sustained abstinence and make relapse more likely.³ Furthermore, science has proven that changes in the brain's structure and function are what causes people to have intense cravings.⁴

¹ Statement by Ms. Despina Spanou, Head of Cabinet of Vice-President of the European Commission, Margaritis Schinas, during the Kangaroo Group's event titled 'Can lifestyle changes deliver a silver bullet to cancer?' on 3rd March 2021.

² American Psychiatric Association, 'What Is a Substance Use Disorder?' (Addiction and Substance Use Disorders, December 2020) <<https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/addiction/what-is-addiction>>

³ National Institute On Drug Abuse, 'Why do drug-addicted persons keep using drugs?' (Principles of Drug Addiction Treatment: A Research-Based Guide, January 2018) <<https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/principles-drug-addiction-treatment-research-based-guide-third-edition/frequently-asked-questions/why-do-drug-addicted-persons-keep-using-drugs>>

⁴ American Psychiatric Association, 'What Is a Substance Use Disorder?' (Addiction and Substance Use Disorders, December 2020) <<https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/addiction/what-is-addiction>>

It is therefore impossible to achieve nicotine-free Europe without having a proper regard to the science behind addictions. Mere banning or restricting the use of certain substances will not enable the politicians to reach their ambitions.

2. Drugs destroy people, but bad politics even more so

History has already shown that prohibitions and bans do not work. The global war on drugs has failed, with devastating consequences for individuals and societies around the world. Fifty years after the initiation of the UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, and 40 years after former U.S. President Nixon launched the government's war on drugs, fundamental reforms in national and global drug control policies are urgently needed.⁵ In the words of Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, "drugs destroy people, but bad politics even more so!"⁶

Already back in 2009, Mr. Carel Edwards, former EU Drug Policy Coordinator, said that "a world without drugs is not possible". Back then, Mr. Edwards insisted that the European Union gives up on the idea of a drug-free world, and that drugs are something to live with and deal with.⁷ Twelve years later, the approach of the European Commission has shifted completely, and the Europe's Beating Cancer Plan speaks exactly about achieving Europe without addictions. The European decision-makers are given an opportunity not to repeat the mistakes of the past, and to recognise the importance of science in its long-term strategy regarding addictions.

3. Worse outlook with the COVID-19 pandemic fallout

Another element which has become increasingly relevant when discussing the future of addictions in the EU is the COVID-19 pandemic. Experts agree that the pandemic had further exacerbated the long-standing economic and political challenges, which has the potential to lead to the increase in use of psychoactive substances and to higher levels of mental health morbidity.⁸ The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) has also conducted surveys on changes in substance use pattern in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the found increases in the use of illicit drugs, alcohol, and prescription medicines as a means to address anxiety and depression during lockdown.⁹

⁵ Global Commission on Drug Policy, 'Report of the Global Commission on Drug Policy' (War on Drugs, June 2011) <http://www.globalcommissionondrugs.org/wp-content/themes/gcdp_v1/pdf/Global_Commission_Report_English.pdf>

⁶ Global Commission on Drug Use, 'Speech of Commissioner Kofi Annan, 68th World Health Assembly' (Opinions, Interviews And Articles, 21 May 2015) <<https://www.globalcommissionondrugs.org/speech-of-commissioner-kofi-annan-68th-world-health-assembly>>

⁷ Vendula Běláčková, 'Svět bez drog není možný, říká drogový expert Carel Edwards' (Idnes.cz, 28 November 2009) <https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/archiv/svet-bez-drog-neni-mozny-rika-drogovy-expert-carel-edwards.A091125_162216_kavarna_bos>

⁸ EMCDDA, 'EMCDDA releases study findings on the impact of COVID-19 on drug markets, use and services in the southern ENP region' (Publications, 22 December 2020) <https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/news/2020/emcdda-releases-study-findings-on-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-drug-markets-use-and-services-in-the-southern-emp-region_en>

⁹ EMCDDA, 'COVID-19: New EMCDDA study highlights decline in stimulant drug use but some rises in the use of cannabis, alcohol and prescription medicines to combat anxiety and depression' (Publications, 22 June 2020) <https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/news/2020/covid-19-new-emcdda-study-highlights-decline-stimulant-drug-use_en>

Scientists argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has set in motion a future wave of addictions and mental health deterioration in our society. The effects of the pandemic are not going to go away, because the damage is already done. It is therefore expected that we're going to see people with greater problems managing addiction in the years to come.¹⁰ That shows the need for a comprehensive long-term strategy which is based on science, and which offers innovative ways of approaching the phenomena of addictions.

Treatment and harm reduction policy as a way forward

Research indicates that active participation in treatment is an essential component for good outcomes and can benefit in managing addictive behavior of individuals.¹¹ Furthermore, alternative tobacco products and harm reduction policies are a significant positive tool in the work with addicted individuals.

Strong and wide body of scientific evidence exists which indeed proves that alternative tobacco products such as e-cigarettes are less harmful than normal cigarettes, and that the approach of harm reduction helps smokers quit or reduce their use of tobacco products.¹² Furthermore, studies by Lucchiari (2020)¹³ and Glasser (2020)¹⁴ demonstrated that more frequent and stable use of electronic cigarettes can help smokers to quit smoking. Electronic cigarettes are also recommended as a way to quit smoking by the UK National Health Services website titled 'using e-cigarettes to stop smoking' which says that "many thousands of people in the UK have already stopped smoking with the help of an e-cigarette. There's growing evidence that they can be effective."¹⁵

IRAP strongly believes that treatment, alternative tobacco products and harm reduction policies are a significant benefit in the fight to reduce deaths, and to achieve the objectives of the Europe's Beating Cancer Plan. IRAP calls on the European Commission and to the EU Member States to be realistic when setting objectives such as the nicotine-free Europe. As such, IRAP hopes that the future regulatory measures proposed by the Commission will be based on science and recognize the importance of innovative approaches to addictions, such as the harm reduction policy.

¹⁰ Andrew H. Rogers, Justin M. Shepherd, Lorra Garey, Michael J. Zvolensky. Psychological factors associated with substance use initiation during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Psychiatry Research*, 2020; 293: 113407

¹¹ National Institute On Drug Abuse, 'Why do drug-addicted persons keep using drugs?' (Principles of Drug Addiction Treatment: A Research-Based Guide, January 2018) <<https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/principles-drug-addiction-treatment-research-based-guide-third-edition/frequently-asked-questions/why-do-drug-addicted-persons-keep-using-drugs>>

¹² Ann McNeill and others, 'Evidence review of e-cigarettes and heated tobacco products 2018: executive summary' (E-cigarettes and heated tobacco products: evidence review, 2 March 2018) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/e-cigarettes-and-heated-tobacco-products-evidence-review/evidence-review-of-e-cigarettes-and-heated-tobacco-products-2018-executive-summary>>

¹³ Claudio Lucchiari and others, 'Benefits of e-cigarettes in smoking reduction and in pulmonary health among chronic smokers undergoing a lung cancer screening program at 6 months' [April 2020] 103(106222) Elsevier

¹⁴ Glasser A, 'Patterns of e-cigarette use and subsequent cigarette smoking cessation over two years (2013/2014 to 2015/2016) in the Population Assessment of Tobacco and Health (PATH) Study' [September 2020] Prime PubMed <[https://www.unboundmedicine.com/medline/citation/32939555/Patterns_of_e-cigarette_use_and_subsequent_cigarette_smoking_cessation_over_two_years_\(2013/2014_to_2015/2016\)_in_the_Population_Assessment_of_Tobacco_and_Health_\(PATH\)_Study](https://www.unboundmedicine.com/medline/citation/32939555/Patterns_of_e-cigarette_use_and_subsequent_cigarette_smoking_cessation_over_two_years_(2013/2014_to_2015/2016)_in_the_Population_Assessment_of_Tobacco_and_Health_(PATH)_Study)>

¹⁵ NHS, 'Using e-cigarettes to stop smoking' (Quit smoking, 29 March 2019) <<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/quit-smoking/using-e-cigarettes-to-stop-smoking/>>

ABOUT IRAP

Institute for Rational Addiction Policies (IRAP) is a multi-disciplinary think-tank of independent and reputable experts that studies the question of addiction from all sides (public and individual health, legislation and other legal effects, security matters, economics and market modelling, tax issues, effects on the state budget, education and prevention, and social, sociological, and political questions).