

Public health: prevention of injury and promotion of safety

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This Communication focuses on the prevention of accidents and injuries in the Member States through the promotion of public health actions. It provides a strategic framework in the form of a Community action plan which will help the Member States prioritise injury prevention. The actions being proposed will form part of the “Community Public Health Programme” 2003-2008 as well as the “Consumer Policy Strategy” 2003-2006.

The Action Plan has been designed to give the Community the evidence-based information that is needed to help all Member States reduce the burden of injuries. The ultimate goal is to reduce injury mortality and morbidity and to ensure that the Community becomes a safer place to live in.

Previous accident prevention initiatives have managed to reduce the frequency of injuries considerably. Examples include road accidents, workplace accidents, chemical accidents and consumer product related injuries. However, there is still room for improvement. The Communication points to the significant differences in accident and injury rates between Member States and within their populations. The current injury mortality rate in the EU ranges from 27 deaths per 100 000 residents in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands to more than 143 deaths per 100 000 in Lithuania.

Preventative action not only helps reduce the huge burden on societies and individuals it also reduces, considerably, high health care costs and the costs to society from lost productivity. Every year, about 235 000 citizens of the Member States die as a result of an accident or violence. Annually, over 50 million citizens seek medical treatment for an injury and 6.8 million of these are admitted to hospital. Ample evidence exists to prove that preventative measures are cost effective, given that the benefits of preventing injuries often outweigh the costs of intervention by a factor of ten.

This Communication highlights the role of the health care sector in injury prevention. The kind of actions foreseen for workers in the health care sector are:

- quantifying the problems, identifying risk factors and measuring the effectiveness of interventions;
- the reporting of risk factors;
- advocating primary prevention;
- disseminating evidence-based strategies;
- increasing the professional capacities for advising people at risk;
- leading cross-cutting action plans; and

- informing the public about hazards and what safety precautions they can take.

Based on the data received from the Member States the Commission will set up a common information system on accidents and injuries. Such information is a prerequisite for policy making. It will have the advantage of combining data on health and injury statistics as well as helping policy makers assess the health burden vis-à-vis accidents and injuries. The common information system will be complemented by Community support for the exchange of good practice; Community support for national action plans and risk communication.

These action plans have been devised to focus on seven particularly vulnerable groups. They are:

- Children and adolescents;
- Elderly citizens;
- Vulnerable road users (pedestrians, cyclists)
- Sports injuries
- Injuries caused by products and services;
- People vulnerable to self harm;
- People vulnerable to interpersonal violence.

This Communication is accompanied by a Council Recommendation in which the roles of the Member States and the Commission in implementing this Action Plan are specified (please refer to summary of the initial proposal).