

ALCOHOLOGICAL POLICIES AND CULTURAL CHANGE BETWEEN CARE AND ADVOCACY

EUROCARE GENERAL ASSEMBLY – BRUSSELS, 28 JUNE 2023

Eurocare Italia has been working in Italy for thirty years to promote the prevention and reduction of alcohol-related problems in the general population, according to the population approach promoted by the WHO. **Eurocare Italia considers alcohol consumption as a risk factor in itself**, freeing it from the identification of risk categories, or normal or harmful consumption patterns, and from the stigmatization that results from this. It recognizes in Alcoholology a paradigm that invites us to reflect on the concepts of health, of multidimensionality of human suffering, of community engagement, and of scientific and cultural commitment to self-protection and self-promotion of well-being and health.

The association's headquarters now host many activities, carried out in close synergy with the Territorial Alcohol Clubs movement, conceived and promoted by Croatian psychiatrist Professor Vladimir Hudolin. These activities are aimed at harmonizing prevention policies and actions with treatment and care functions.

The social-ecological approach emphasizes **the need to change the health and general culture of the community in which people live and work**, promoting people to develop an individual responsibility for their own health, and that of the whole community. A responsibility that comes not only from being more informed, critical or aware of alcohol, but also **from questioning the concept of health itself, and therefore of care, that involves a shift from an individual to a collective and public health perspective.**

The treatment of alcohol-related problems and the development of a competent citizenry, critical with regards to political choices, are two elements that work together to represent the path of care. The point should not be whether I drink a little or a lot, but the awareness that drinking in itself is a behaviour that is placed within precise cultural, social and commercial dynamics, and to understand where I want to place myself within all this. I say “I” to emphasize the fact that each person is responsible for themselves as well as for others. Every person should be involved, not just individuals or families with an alcohol-related problem. In this way Eurocare Italia carries out an intense cultural action that sensitizes individuals and communities to a social-ecological approach towards any form of suffering, like alcohol-related suffering. The aim is **to reposition people's suffering within an ecological and anthropological framework, freeing it from the processes of medicalization and psychiatric practices inherent in traditional care models**, and their relative outcomes, with particular attention to the processes of stigmatization, and the ease with which these processes cage people into precise dynamics of power, commercial and social

control. Let me give you an example. We know how dear the concept of moderate or responsible drinking is to the industry, and how it uses its ambiguity to normalize alcohol consumption: identifying 'normal' levels of consumption allows to attribute 'harmful use' (or 'alcoholism') to single individuals, those who are problematic and unable to manage themselves, relieving itself, its pervasive and aggressive marketing, and its pressing public and institutional lobbying, from all responsibility in promoting a drinking culture and people's behavioral choices. Moreover, the concept of moderate drinking is also dear to a system of care that distinguishes a healthy drinker from a pathological one, the more normal from the deviants, which sets health goals that seek the extinction of disease and the restoration of a normality established at the table. This, however, completely overlooks the fact that **any form of suffering is generated within a precise social and cultural context, therefore, within the system of care, it is also necessary for the context to be contemplated as an object of change.**

Indeed, removing suffering from the processes of medicalization and psychiatric treatment doesn't mean deprofessionalization. **Healthcare professionals are invited to reflect on the theoretical and practical consequences of their actions**, avoiding the lure of exercising social control and sharing with each person in distress a perspective that frees them from the many mechanisms of social and cultural oppression, and always questioning themselves and their role. This requires anyone exercising a professional function to dedicate themselves to research, both technical and scientific, free from any perspective of subordination to the interests of the dominant culture, interests that are both economic and of maintaining the social order. It is understandable that, in cases of difficulty, one relies on, and delegates an expert to find a solution to a problem that seems insurmountable. This however risks triggering a mechanism that delays and atrophies the wealth of experiential, cognitive, existential, mental and biological resources that are present in each of us. **Professional skills cannot be a justification for de-responsibility.** Being responsible means playing a leading role in a relational context and being available to help resolve a problem. Our work invites us to reclaim how we care for others and stimulates each of us to redefine the question, especially in the most difficult moments, by redirecting it towards a learning process that increases each person's skills, accessing existing scientific and cultural knowledge, improving its quality, and orienting it towards a liberating and non-delegating pathway.

So professionals are also called to reinterpret the theories and practices of their work in an attempt to align with the community programs that have always been suggested by the WHO and also re-proposed in the latest European Framework for Action on Alcohol, as a partnership in action, a board collaboration with the general population and civil society, where each person questions themselves. **A cultural action that raises awareness of thinking and behaviors based on the principles of ethics, community participation, and individual responsibility, from which no one can be excluded.**

A systemic and ecological approach to treatment is an evolutionary and transformative process that takes place **in interpersonal dialogue, in the restoration of authentic community life, in the reconciliation of one's dis-ease with existing cultural dynamics.** Everyone is called upon to participate first-hand and freely: people with lived experience, like the person who brings a problem forward along with his or her family members, or professionals, or students in training. If

the goal is cultural change, we are all on an equal footing and equally responsible to the commitment of our personal path of growth and maturation, aimed at enhancing individual skills and resources made available to all as collective resources.

In our experiential workshop in Padua we try to achieve all this out, including meetings between club families, weekly and monthly formative moments, cultural events, promotional and informative activities through our website, independent publications, psychotherapy, and much more. Everyone is a participant in an assembly and community dimension and not observers. On our site, for example, you also find articles written by club members (the people with lived experience), or others who sometimes contribute to translations of international documents. The conference in memory of Tiziana Codenotti on science, culture and experience in the field of alcoholology was held on June 14th and everyone took part in the organization, especially in preparing a lunch worthy of the best chefs. In our schools, people with lived experience are just as much educators as are the professionals.

In conclusion, **international public health policies provide for specific actions in terms of prevention but they must be supported and enforced by a radical reform in professional practices and a change in the dominant culture.**

This is our way of doing politics and supporting national and international public health policies in our own small way. In particular, we want to emphasize the political function that Alcoholology expresses when citizens become protagonists of a critical reflection starting from their own behavior and invite political institutions to place at the center of their agendas not economic interests and profits but instead the Common Good, found in the authentic dimension of community.