



Preventing drug addiction in children and youth

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Your Majesty,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a privilege to be here to share experiences on constructive solutions to the threat of drugs and the epidemic abuse that we see in many countries. I thank the Pontifical Academy of Sciences for arranging this important workshop. The Mentor Foundation that I chair, is an organization dedicated to preventing children and youth from falling into drug abuse. I appreciate the opportunity to share with you what we have learned over the past 20 years and I look very much forward to learn from everybody present here about concepts to work together.

We have a special responsibility to protect children and young people from using drugs. The damages to the young developing brain is much more severe than for an adult. I am sure the scientists here today will describe this in detail.

I like to start with giving you a short background on our work. The Mentor Foundation was founded by HM Queen Silvia in 1994 in Geneva as an independent, non-governmental, not for profit organization working on international drug abuse prevention for youth. The organization was founded in collaboration with World Health Organization in Geneva and was officially launched at the United Nations in Geneva in 1994.

We have learned a lot during the past 22 years and our focus and methods have gradually changed as we have adapted to the change in the world and to the knowledge that have evolved from research. Since the start of Mentor, we have undertaken and supported more than 60 projects in more than 80 countries. That has had an impact on the lives of millions of children and young people. We have established 7 national affiliates working in Sweden, UK, Germany, Lithuania, USA, Latvia and Denmark. We have also established a regional organization in Lebanon, which serves the 22 Arab League Countries. These local organizations enable us to work directly with many thousands of young people, and to build networks to expand our reach in many countries.

Our Vision: is world where children and young people are empowered to make healthy decisions and live free of drugs.

Having spent the last 20 years gathering knowledge, know how and expertise, today we work with our National members to undertake two main types of activity:

- We deliver and evaluate programmes to prevent drug abuse and to support positive youth development
- We campaign for better youth development and prevention practice and policy

There are many factors associated with an increased risk of alcohol and drug problems among young people. These factors are:

Individual: Low level of well-being, Lack of self-esteem, Lack of belief in the future, early substance use and positive attitude towards drugs, genetic predisposition, lack of self-control/aggressiveness, anti-social behavior.

Family: Family abusing drugs, negative relationship w parents, Low parental aspirations for child, Inadequate parent supervision, lack of stability, maltreatment.

School & Friends: Negative relationships with adults, low commitment to school, lack of people to trust, peer pressure.

Community: Accessibility to drugs, socioeconomic background.

At Mentor, we base our work on a holistic approach that includes the individual, the home and the school and the community. We have identified those factors that we know that we are effective in changing positively. Our programs focus on strengthening the following key protective factors:

The young person's self-esteem, belief in the future, attitude towards drugs, parental relations and provide other adult relationships.

Research shows that having multiple positive adult relationships is one of the primary protective factors against destructive behaviors.

We also focus on building on the upside potential such as helping see meaning with completing education and inspiration towards employment. It is very important for any individual to have a positive goal to work towards rather than avoiding negative risk factors. It is as much about preventing the downside outcome of drug abuse as it is to build on the positive potential of a more fulfilling life.

We offer therefore a core set of programs in all National Mentor organizations. These programs are built on strengthening an adult role model in the life of the youth. The three main programs are:

- Individual Mentoring
- Group Mentoring for job inspiration
- Parenting Support Programs

The reason these programs have been selected as our core programs is that they have proven to be very effective in building up resilience against risky behavior and drug abuse. The programs are designed to build up confidence and motivation for young people to see the positive outcome of a healthy life style. We help build the confidence in young people that they can succeed in developing a fulfilling life. The dream of a positive future is a very strong motivation to stay healthy and make good choices in life.

Through our core programs we can see strong improvements in self-esteem, beliefs in the future, attitude to drugs as well as parental relationships and general relations with other grown-ups. The programs focus on 13-17 yr olds and we work with schools in vulnerable communities.

A growing number of refugee children are becoming part of our programs in several countries. In Sweden they now represent almost 20% in our programs. This is a rapidly growing number. We have therefore brought together Mentor Sweden, Mentor Germany and Mentor Arabia to set up a special training and support to the mentors to be able to handle this very vulnerable group of youth.

Over the years Mentor has built strong partnerships with organizations in different parts of the world. Earlier this year, the UNODC launched the Listen First Campaign which we are part of supporting. The campaign highlights the importance of listening to a child. In line with this our National Member in USA has started a program called Shattering The Myths together with NIDA, the National Institute on Drugs in USA. The program brings very large groups of youth and scientists together in form of town-hall meetings. The program is currently being evaluated by the George Washington University.

In Germany we have developed a program called REBOUND together with the University of Heidelberg aiming at preventing high-school students from risky behaviors.

The youth participating are encouraged to see themselves as 'agents' of their own development. REBOUND's use of film as a medium. The program is under evaluation. EDPQS (European Drug Prevention Quality Standards) is applied.

In the UK we are working as project partners with the implementation of the primary school program called Good Behavior Game. This evidence based classroom management program that has shown its effectiveness in reduction in risky behaviors in later years

We have done a two-year project with the school prevention program "Unplugged" in Croatia, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania, Romania and Russia. The project served to start prevention initiatives for 12-14 yr olds in those countries. This was done in project partnership with The European Union Drug Abuse Prevention EUDAP. The implementation of this program is now handled by local organizations in each country. Unplugged is also implemented in several Arabian countries by Mentor.

We undertook a program called "Prevention & Health through Sport" with the International Olympic Committee. The program is a partnership with a local prevention organization in Uganda. This successful program is spreading in Uganda.

We all know the tremendous suffering that drug abuse will cause for the individual and the family involved. There is also a great cost for the society. Several studies have been reviewed to look at the Social Return on Investment on prevention activities. As a case, the Boston Consulting Group took a specific look at our mentoring programs in Sweden. Their study indicates a conservative estimate of savings to the society with a multiple effect of up to 15 times. This means that every investment into this program implementation generates

a saving of 15 times for the society. This relates to medical, social and juridical cost related to drug abuse as well as reduced unemployment cost. It also includes the positive contribution of higher education and higher life income. This is based on official statistics in Sweden and through research reports in Sweden. The benefit could be calculated even higher if additional positive effects are taken into account such as the individual's contribution to the society. Good prevention generates important long-term value and savings for the community beyond the vast personal suffering that is avoided.

The collaboration with all sectors of the community is important to reach good results with prevention initiatives. I have mentioned the importance of the family and the school. I also like to point out the importance of the Business community. Our learning is that this sector has been crucial as partners in our important mission. This is where our youth find much of the inspiration and hopes for the future. The business sector contributes their employees as mentors in our programs and the sector provides a steady funding for our work. In some countries the corporate contributions represent the majority of our funding. We could never have delivered our prevention programs in such large numbers without our important corporate partnerships.

I think all of us in this room feel at times frustrated that we cannot reach more Individuals with good prevention initiatives more quickly. But it is important to recognize the ripple effect deriving from individual actions. There is much to be learned from studies in consumer behaviors. Studies prove that a change in attitude in one person transfers over to other people. The initial action has an indirect impact on others and also gives an induced effect in people further removed. Based on such studies, The Boston Consulting Group reviewed the impact of how our prevention programs in Sweden during 2015. They estimate that for every participant in our program there is an indirect reach of additional 2 people and an induced effect on almost 2 more people.

86% of participating youth report that they have an improved self-esteem after completing the programs. In 2015 our prevention programs in Sweden reached 17 000 young people aged 13-17 yrs, who directly participating in our programs. Beyond that – an additional 40,000 were indirectly affected and an induced effect on additional 30,000 people. In total approx 90,000 individuals were affected by these prevention efforts.

Since the start with these programs in Sweden in 1996, 60,000 young people have been directly affected by the programs. If we add the indirect and induced effects – this represent a very significant impact on youth in Sweden. (approx. 280,000 youth in Sweden)

The international collaboration is crucial for success!

- The (UNODC) published 'International Standards on Drug Use Prevention' in 2015. These standards were developed through a systematic review of the international evidence on prevention and provide a summary of the available scientific evidence. Mentor together with other NGOs has provided input to these standards.
- We have also taken an active role in the work of the Vienna NGO Committee on Drugs, which is a vital link between NGOs and international agencies involved in drug policy, strategy and control.
- To share our experience at Mentor, we have developed a global interactive portal and forum for the exchange of knowledge, good practice and information relating to prevention. This portal is called the Prevention Hub. It was launched 3 years ago and last year it was handed over to be maintained by UNODC.

Of course the use and access of information has changed the threat of potential harm for youth over the years. The access a young person has to information is just a click away. This means access to illegal drugs and information about legal highs in all forms. A threat to youth is the new substances that are sold over the internet. Those not familiar with these products can easily believe they are not dangerous. On the contrary, they can be even more harmful than some of the illegal products.

The abuse of prescription medicine now represents an epidemic health threat. Behind all the frightening statistics about the lost lives there is always personal devastating traumas for the individuals. Let me introduce one 17yr old boy to you. I like to show you a film that was has sent to us by his father. After the father lost his son he contacted us to help save other children.

He says: "Since the death of my youngest son, Mark, I have asked myself so many questions over and over again. What if I had talked to Mark more about the dangers of drugs? If I hadn't missed the signs of an addiction problem, would Mark still be alive? A week before his high-school graduation, Mark went to school and he played basketball. He was looking forward to his pending graduation. But the next day, Mark never woke up. He died from a mix of prescription drugs. His father says: I never knew that Mark was abusing prescription drugs. My hope is that this will serve as a "second chance" for others. The sad story that we just have witnessed is the reality of millions of people around the world.

Our work here today and tomorrow is to prevent further spread of this epidemic threat to our world's children. "It takes a village to raise a child and it takes a focused global community to tackle the problems that face our youth in terms of threats related to drugs."

I thank you again for this opportunity to share this and I look forward to our further discussions during these two days.

Thank you.