Editorial: Cultural and Political Aspects of Addiction

Michael Krausz

No illness takes up as much room in social and public health discussions as addiction; it is the object of extensive legal considerations, keeps local politicians and chiefs of police busy, as was the case in Germany in early 1997. Somehow, everybody takes an interest in it, the attention of the media has not diminished, but in spite of this interest, discussions and reports on addiction are more like weather reports than scientific discourses. There is no doubt that addiction is also a cultural manifestation. There are great differences in the consumption patterns, the prevalence rates, the legal, social and even therapeutic approaches to addiction. These differences represent centuries of historical developments or might be the results of social crisis and transitional periods as currently in Central and Eastern Europe. The study of these differences could yield a treasure of knowledge concerning the development of addiction in individuals and in cultures and thus lead to an improvement of the addicts’ quality of life.

Why are we concerned with these aspects of addiction research? The purpose of scientific research should be to tie together various threads and to look at a problem from different points of view. The objective of this journal has always been the promotion of addiction research as an interdisciplinary exchange from the points of view of various national and cultural developments, of various scientific and political approaches with the aim to gain new insights for action. This is an extensive and long-term venture; in this issue we look at certain aspects of it and ask for the help of all those researchers who work in the field of addiction. A great deal of sound empirical and theoretical research is being done in different European countries. We wish to further the discussion and help to bring together the results of this research. This theme will be carried on in the next issues of the journal: the special problem of addiction and the law, reflexions on social changes in Middle and Eastern Europe in connection with the changing consumption patterns and the societal approach towards addiction.

In anticipation of this special topic, the study by Lubomir Okruhlica is a very interesting contribution from Slovakia. Even this short overview of changed prevalence based on registration files underlines the significance of the transitional period in Middle and Eastern Europe with regard to behavioural patterns. The dramatic changes of the social context create a whole new set of tasks in the field of prevention and treatment of addiction. History does not often give us the opportunity to study the interaction of culture, society and individual behaviour in the context of such deeply rooted transitions.

The two cross-cultural papers have a different approach to the study of consumption patterns in the interaction of cultural influences and addictive behaviour. Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir and colleagues from Reykjavik compare data of consumption habits and preferences from Iceland, Finland and other European countries and discover a number of interesting changes. The weakening of prohibition in Iceland and the legalisation of beer resulted in an increasing preference for ‘weak alcoholic beverages’ compared to strong spirits. This effect, with regard to beer, could be shown for the majority of the population, while, with regard to wine, the effect
was more marked for higher social classes. On the other hand, the conclusions show the enormous differences of consumption that exist for instance between southern Europe and Scandinavia. They show the strong correlation between social consumption, development of addiction and culture. One of the main differences of consumption behaviour between Iceland and most other European countries is the consumption of alcoholic beverages at meals, which is still very unusual in Iceland and leads to a markedly lower total consumption. In spite of a general trend to conform to international habits, drinking habits apparently still follow specific cultural conditions, a fact that should lead to many implications for prevention and treatment.

Cross-cultural comparisons of consumption patterns are very rare, though the comparison of different conditions of socialisation could lead to an evaluation of risk factors and a deeper understanding of the relationship between addiction and socialisation. The comparison of the alcohol consumption of Irish and American adolescents by Joel Grube and his team, and the resulting problems, is therefore highly relevant. The results, for instance of the increasing alcohol consumption of girls and the increasing problem of alcohol addiction of young Irish men, reflect the change of norms and sex roles especially in youth cultures. Attention has been focused on youth cultures also in connection with the changes of other patterns, namely in the field of illegal drugs. The increasingly active discussion concerning ecstasy and changed consumption patterns among adolescents are two sides of the same coin.

The study by Kreuzer and Stock from the Institute of Criminology in Giessen investigates this relationship from the point of view of the state executive in Germany. This issue has gained great topicality due to the decision of the majority of German police presidents of major cities to change the policy of prohibition. It shows to what extent the behaviour of police and justice is influenced by a wide variety of opinions in the population. Combining political aspects, political opinions and the social contacts with addicts, this paper links up with one of the next special topics of this journal, the relationship between addiction and the law.

Considering the different aspects of cultural and political influence one gets the impression that they play a role, perhaps even a decisive one, in explaining the variance in addictive behaviour. It is well known that gender often explains the main differences in addictive behaviour or the development of addiction. Most of all, however, it becomes clear that only a serious debate between natural and social sciences allows an analysis of the complex interactions and points to the most important features of the relationship between social consumption and the development of alcoholism and the enormous consequences for prevention and treatment.