

## **NGO comments on the future of the Science Group**

### **Background**

During the last meeting of the EU Alcohol Health Forum (EAHF) on November 21, the European Commission invited stakeholders to provide their views on the future of the Science Group. This important component of the EAHF which in the past has significantly contributed to its work by regularly providing scientific opinions, has for various reasons been almost entirely inactive for over two years.

UEG, EASL, EPHA, Eurocare and the Royal College of Physicians warmly welcome the initiative by the European Commission and the current chair of the Science Group Sir Ian Gilmore to re-assess the functioning of the Group and attempt to “revive”, and potentially, expand its activities. In this document the aforementioned NGOs will contribute to this exercise by expressing their views on the future of this scientific body.

### **Importance of the Science Group within the EAHF**

According to the Charter establishing the EAHF, the role of the Science Group should be that:

*“At the request of participants, the Group provides scientific advice and guidance on matters under discussion by the Forum”.*

This role is of key value for the credibility and continuity of the EAHF. The Science Group has a key task in moving discussions forward that are blocked due to a lack of conclusive scientific evidence.

Moreover, the Science Group has an important potential role in bringing together top European scientists in alcohol research to update each other on research developments at the national level, to discuss synergies between the different research areas and to examine common “European” research priorities that could potentially be included in one of the future calls of Horizon 2020<sup>1</sup>. For the latter we also see, due to the crucial role research can play in many debates on alcohol related harm within EU society, also a key role for individual research, scientific and policy oriented organisations active in the prevention and treatment of alcohol related harm. We take the view that future research priority setting would also benefit from input by independent scientific and public health associations in addition to the Science Group.

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<sup>1</sup> UEG, EASL and the Royal College of Physicians are currently contributing to the latter by conducting a similar exercise for their own disease area

## **Consequences of inactivity and main future challenges**

Current inactivity has led to a situation whereby the potential of the Science Group has not been met.

Occasionally EAHF members such as the Royal College of Physicians still call on the Science Group to function as a broker for a disagreement between industry and the NGOs, but unfortunately the Science Group is in its current capacity unable to respond to this type of request.

Also the limited amount of live meetings and general interaction between the group members make it at present impossible to effectively tackle the other described potential tasks the Science Group could fulfil in the future.

The current main challenge for the Science Group is to become active again and stop the departure of its members. At the last live meeting of the Group only 6 out of the official 16 remaining members still participated<sup>2</sup>. At the moment there is insufficient support for the Group to conduct the tasks at hand, let alone take on board additional assignments.

Finally, a strong secretariat is needed to drive the work of the Science Group.

## **Recommendations for the future tasks and structure of the Science Group**

### **To improve the current functioning of the Science Group:**

- ❖ A new call for experts should be launched to refresh the reserve list and fill up the empty seats in the Science Group. The last call dates from January 2008 and the successful candidates following that call may no longer be available or interested in conducting work for the EAHF. Moreover, many new scientists/experts in the field deserve a chance to apply for a position in the Group.
- ❖ The current workload may be too heavy for the group members and (additional) financial means should be made available for calling on external research institutes to support the work of the Group. This measure should be implemented in addition to the possibility to form a working group with the help of experts on the reserve list.
- ❖ The administrative support to the Group should continue to be provided by the European Commission. The secretariat should in particular, assist the Chair in engaging the group members in the work of the EAHF and encourage them to attend the meetings. It should also remain in charge of drafting the agenda, writing the minutes and communicate the requests from the EAHF to the Science Group.

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<sup>2</sup> The initial Science Group consisted of 20 members, but four have officially left the Group in the meantime and more are likely to follow if nothing changes.

- ❖ Remuneration rules for the work of group members, should be reviewed in order to ensure that they are appealing enough to continue attracting top scientists across Europe for a long-term commitment
- ❖ The agenda of the EAHF should reserve on a regular basis speaking time for the chair of the Science Group to report back on the Groups' activities. This will contribute to strengthening the ties between the Science Group and the EAHF.
- ❖ The expertise of the Science Group should be made equally available to CNAPA

**Proposed future tasks:**

- ❖ Identify European research priorities that would potentially be included in the Horizon 2020 programme. This exercise should be done in close coordination with research, scientific and policy oriented organisations active in the prevention and treatment of alcohol related harm. A separate paper on research priorities as requested by the Commission at the November 2013 EAHF meeting is being prepared.
- ❖ To contribute to reducing the many current gaps in alcohol research, smaller, or occasionally, even larger research tasks should be assigned to the Science Group directly. The research tasks should be based on the discussions within the EAHF and the general public debate on alcohol policies and research. However, ultimate responsibility for allocating tasks to the Science Group should remain with the Commission.
- ❖ To continue providing scientific opinions to the EAHF (and CNAPA) on the basis of existing research studies
- ❖ To be a scientific broker for discussions within the EAHF and CNAPA
- ❖ To be proactive and also monitor and communicate newly conducted research relevant for the alcohol field to the EAHF and CNAPA

## Conclusion

The revival of the Science Group can play an important role in breaking through the status quo and have discussions within the forum move forward again. The current maintenance of the status quo will on the long term threaten the mere existence of the EAHF as stakeholders may no longer see the benefits of membership. The recent departure of Active-Sobriety, Friendship and Peace, IOGT-NTO, European Youth Forum and UNF - the Swedish Youth Temperance Association could be perceived as a first sign pointing in that direction.

Moreover, we are strongly in favour of the idea to assign more tasks to a renewed Science Group as the potential of the Science Group as a scientific body goes beyond its current tasks description.

All in all, the signatories of this document strongly support the revival of the Science Group and are ready to further support the European Commission in its efforts where needed.

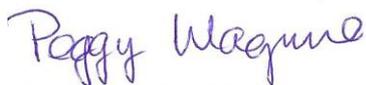
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