

## **Opening speech by Ms Maria Larsson at the Expert Conference on Alcohol and Health, in Norra latin, Stockholm, 21 September 2009.**

Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good morning and welcome to this conference. I am very glad that we are so many here for these conference days. The big interest and commitment exceeds our expectations. Here are NGO`s, government officials and a lot of other stakeholders from 27 different european countries. Here are more than 20 presentations in the plenary, 9 workshops, 30 open seminars, an open scene and more than 30 exhibitions.

I hope you will take the opportunity to visit as many of these activities as possible during these two days. And to all of you from my heart: Very welcome!

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Europeans drink the most in the world. Harmful consumption of alcohol is the third largest risk factor for ill health in the European Union. We can count up to 195 000 deaths each year because of it. And the estimated cost is around 125 billion Euros. That´s why we are here. To learn from research, from reports and from each other and to be able to do better at home.

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The focus of this first day is our children. That is also one of five focus in the EU Alcohol strategy - to protect children, young people and the unborn child from alcohol-related harm. Let me start by showing you three human faces.

The first face belongs to Jan, a child I met when I was a teacher. Jan told me that he was afraid to go home because one of his parents could be drunk and angry when he got home. Kids like Jan are often ashamed and they think that they are alone in their situation. They are often the ones holding the family together and they do their best to hide the secret in the family and bear a heavy burden.

In my country, and all over Europe, there are thousands of children like Jan, who grow up in families where family members have alcohol problems. If you grow up like that the risk is five times higher for you to get the same problem. Unless there are adults who sees, understands, helps and supports.

The second face belongs to Anna. She is pregnant and she has decided, this time, to abstain from alcohol during pregnancy and breastfeeding. A study in Sweden showed that up to 30 % of pregnant women had been drinking alcohol once or more during pregnancy just a few years ago. This has now dropped to 8 %, because

of fantastic prevention work done by midwives. The good news is that it is possible to change behaviour, if there is a good working method.

The third face is the face of Evelina. She is 19 years old and she is already an alcoholic. Today she is struggling to stop drinking. But she says: "I have never been so alone since I stopped drinking". Drinking alcohol is a natural part of many young girls' leisure time. Girls nowadays drink like boys. One result is an increasing number of boys and girls that are treated for alcohol poisoning.

These personal stories about Evelina, Anna and Jan are three out of many. That's why we are here.

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The first day of this conference has the children in focus. It is alarming that a higher proportion of the disease burden from harmful use of alcohol is experienced by young people. This fact calls for joint actions at all levels. The EU Alcohol Strategy highlights the changing pattern of alcohol consumption among young people. New data indicates that this problem is broadening across the EU Member States. Furthermore, the Science Group of the European Alcohol and Health Forum, concluded that there is a positive relationship between marketing communication and the volume and pattern of young people's consumption. We will discuss protecting young people from commercial pressure to drink at this conference. That's why we are here.

Harmful use of alcohol is not only a problem for the drinker. Alcohol can affect children even before they are born. We know that alcohol during pregnancy can lead to birth defects, not only when the child is newborn, but also during the whole life. And during this conference we will present some good examples from a number of different countries. That's why we are here.

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Alcohol problems are not only something that is about young people. We know that over 58 million adults, 15% of the EU population, consume alcohol at levels where the risk of short or long term harm is increased. Focusing on prevention among adults was therefore essential when planning this conference. We have also noted that older people are more sensitive to the effects of harmful use. The link between alcohol and mental health, such as, depression and confusion, is well known. As I am also the Minister for elderly care I want to highlight the possibilities to achieve the EU target on healthy and dignified aging. A new report on health effects and about consumption trends among elderly in nine EU Member States, will be presented in the plenary tomorrow.

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In October 2006 the Commission adopted the first Alcohol Strategy. This strategy was endorsed by the other EU institutions indicating that a broad consensus had been achieved in the union. This is also confirmed by a survey from the Eurobarometer. More than three quarters of EU citizens support the various policy measures named in the strategy. For example 76 % agree that alcohol advertising targeting young people should be banned. 87 % agree that selling and serving alcohol to people under the age of 18 years should be banned.

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The adoption of the Strategy was the first step. At this conference we will have a midterm report from the Commission. Much has happened since 2006. Almost all MS have a written alcohol policy, more than half of MS now have a minimum age for selling and serving at 18 years, almost all have implemented national drink-driving campaigns etc. Well done! There is still more to do. That's why we are here.

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We need to prioritize public health interest to a higher degree than today. We need to continue, when possible, to build consensus at the EU level. We live in a time when more and more issues are difficult to solve at national level. I am speaking of cross-border trade and marketing. And about new channels like the Internet. When it comes to alcohol marketing it will be extremely difficult to find effective ways to protect our children, but this cannot hinder us from trying.

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Finally, at this conference we have brought together actors that normally have different interests and views on the ways forward. Doing so, we wanted to show our sincere will to look beyond "borders", to reach the identified, common aims of the EU Strategy. We are dealing with an important and serious topic. But the fact that 27 countries send participants here brings hope. Together we can, for example, create conditions for young people to grow up in a safe and healthy environment. That's why we are here.

With these words I would like to open this conference and wish you a nice stay in Stockholm.

Thank You