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Ladies and Gentlemen,

in Germany alcohol is– as in other countries – one of the major causes of health care contact and premature death.

Every year on average 42.000 people die in Germany because of alcohol consumption - directly as a consequence of alcohol misuse or indirectly in a car accident caused by a drunken driver.

In Germany as in other European countries the average alcohol consumption declined over the last years. On the average Germans consumed per capita 10,1 litres in 2004. Of the 80 million inhabitants 9.3 million people between 18 and 69 years drink more than the limit given by WHO for low risk alcohol consumption and of these 1.7 million use alcohol in a harmful way and further 1.7 million are dependent and need treatment.

In my city, Berlin, about 200.000 to 250.000 people use alcohol in a harmful way or are dependent.

About 25 per cent of all deaths of men between 35 and 65 years and 13 per cent of women are attributable to alcohol. It is estimated that the costs of alcohol related diseases amount to 20.6 billion € per year.

Germany has a long tradition of wine and beer production and the selling and export of alcohol is of some importance in our economy. Alcohol consumption is a normal part of social life. Therefore it is not surprising that the alcohol industry has a strong lobby in the political field.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The health care costs are constantly rising and it is clear that we have to control the health care expenditure.

There are several ways to contain health care costs including specific financial regulations for the remuneration of the health care providers and limiting the range of services offered to the people. In all countries there are discussions about the need to cut services within the legal insurance systems or national health care systems and to leave some services for private insurances.

But the most effective way to contain health care expenditures in the future is to prevent people to damage their health by smoking and by using alcohol in a harmful way. From the health care point of view there is an urgent need for preventive measures.

There is a broad agreement between experts and health politicians about the effective measures to reach that goal. First of all it is the prohibition of advertising - at least its limitation - and secondly high alcohol taxes.

In Germany we have good experience with strict regulations for tobacco. The rise of the tobacco tax resulted in a decline of the number of people smoking. And the social acceptance of smoking is becoming weaker more and more. Now our federal government and some provincial governments (Länder) are preparing a new legislation to protect non-smokers against the health-damaging presence of tobacco. The new government of the city of Berlin has announced that it will pass a new bill of non-smoker protection in the coming year including the obligation of smoke-free areas in restaurants and prohibition of smoking in public buildings and limitation of advertising.

The tobacco issue is a good example of the problems health politicians face and the importance of a strict European policy to help health politicians in single countries.

When the former national health minister Andrea Fischer was ready to introduce strict measures to fight against the use of tobacco in 2000 our former chancellor Gerhard Schröder intervened and stopped the plans because of economical interests and focused instead on self-regulation of the industry. The European Policy on Tobacco helped a lot to keep on this issue afterwards. Now we begin to replace the policy of self-regulation of the industry and the liberal commitment of the restaurant owners to extend smoke-free areas step by step by a strict legal regulation.

I am very sure that in the case of alcohol we need again the backing of the European Commission to advance in our efforts to contain the volume of alcohol consumption and the way it is used. Again there is now a growing interest within society to take some measures to contain alcohol consumption in our country.

Many people are concerned that more and more young people are seen in the public with alcoholic drinks in their hands. And the people recognise that one of the most important reasons for this behaviour is an aggressive marketing of the alcohol

industry pretending that alcohol helps young people to be attractive, relaxed and sociable. 58 per cent of the people in my country don't want alcohol advertisements and 57 per cent are against sponsoring of sport events by the alcohol industry. It is worth noting that the alcohol industry in Germany spends about 525 million € on sales promotion per year for ads in the classic media.

It is by no means acceptable that the number of 14 years old students reporting regular alcohol consumption is doubling every five years even when on the other hand the regular alcohol consumption by young people between 12 and 25 years is regressing.

What we need is a comprehensive alcohol policy. Traditionally this policy was based mainly on the work of abstinence organisations. But an alcohol policy with clear objectives, strategies and targets was missing. After the national government passed the alcopops law the tax increase had a positive impact on the consumption of these beverages among young people in lowering their consumption. But measures like this have to be part of a package of measures and options at different political levels and social areas, such as laws to control advertising, education, traffic and consumer protection.

I hope that we will make some progress next year with a new Health Prevention Law which will give prevention a new status and - what is most important – more money for prevention projects. The new law will create a new program focussing on communicating and supporting healthy life styles as well as improving health promotion generally.

Given the important impact on national policies it is a pity that the new strategy to reduce the damage by alcohol which was passed by the European Commission just one month ago was so much weakened during the consultation process. The alcohol industry has succeeded to eliminate the most effective, science based measures out of the original draft of the strategy.

I congratulate Eurocare as an alliance of so many voluntary and non-governmental organisations from all over Europe for bringing the attention of the European public to the deficits of this new strategy and for making it clear that we have to go ahead with a much more stringent package of measures and options.