



NEWS ITEMS OF GENERAL INTEREST

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EQUALITY BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN – Women can serve in the army, but not in all its branches

A cook cannot be transferred to the Royal Marines.

When Angela Maria Sirdar, a cook in the British army, was made redundant as an economy measure, she hoped to find a job in another branch of the army, the Royal Marines. She was turned down, however, because the R.M. does not accept women into its ranks. Was this discrimination, a decision contrary to one of the firmest principles of the European Union (EU)?

Not according to the European Court of Justice. The Court ruled, at the end of October, that women can be excluded from the R.M., given that every member of the corps, without exception, can be called to serve in front-line commando units.

Mrs. Sirdar was made redundant in February, 1994, effective a year later. By mistake she received a written offer that July of a transfer to the R.M. as cook, only to be told, when the error was discovered by the R.M., that she could not be employed because of her sex. Mrs. Sirdar felt she was a victim of discrimination on grounds of sex. She took her case to the industrial tribunal in Bury St. Edmunds, which turned to the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg for guidance on a number of points.

The Court first observed that employment decisions by the armed forces of EU member states are covered by European rules, particularly those rules which ensure that the principle of equal treatment between men and women is respected. It pointed out that the directive, or European law, implementing this principle nevertheless allows member states to exclude occupations for which sex is a determining factor. Consequently, a job in a commando unit, which can find itself in the thick of battle, can be for men only.

MILK PRODUCTION - A hormone which makes cows suffer is unnecessary

A European proposal to continue the ban on BST.

Must cows – and perhaps consumers as well – suffer so that milk can be produced as cheaply as possible? The European Commission thinks not. It therefore asked the European Union (EU) Council of Ministers, at the end of October, to maintain the present ban on the sale and use of bovine somatotrophin (BST). This is a genetically treated growth hormone which stimulates milk production in cows that have been injected with it.

The sale and marketing of BST has been banned in the EU since 1990. In 1994 the EU Council of Ministers extended the ban until 31 December 1999. Under the terms of the current proposal, it would be renewed from 1 January 2000.

Last March two European committees of independent experts held that BST presented serious drawbacks. The scientific committee on animal health and animal welfare concluded that cows injected with the hormone are at greater risk from mastitis and foot and leg diseases. In addition, they are less likely to calve. Under a 1998 directive, or European law, substances can be administered to livestock only for veterinary purposes or on grounds of hygiene, unless they are not harmful to their health or welfare. This does not seem to be the case as regards BST.

For the scientific committee on veterinary measures relating to public health, BST presented a possible health risk for people who drink milk from cows treated with this hormone. They could more readily contract breast and prostate cancer. The same committee added that the scientific evidence in this connection is still inadequate, and that additional research and studies are needed.

TOBACCO - Protecting non-smokers more effectively in the EU

More bans and stronger measures to protect the young.

It is hardly surprising that the «Europe against cancer» programme, which combines research and awareness campaigns, took as its theme, in early October, «Young people and tobacco.» The fact is that 30% of deaths from cancer in the European Union (EU) can be traced to smoking. Nearly 90% of European smokers begin to smoke before the age of 20; studies show that the earlier you start smoking, the more difficult it is to stop. The European Commission has published a report which details the measures taken by member states to protect two groups of persons: children and adolescents, on the one hand, and non-smokers on the other.

Ten years after the EU Council of Ministers adopted a resolution which banned smoking in public places, the national authorities were asked to fill in a questionnaire on the measures taken in some areas of importance to non-smokers and the young. Besides the ban on smoking in public places there is a measure setting a minimum age for smoking in public and buying tobacco products, and others regulating the sale of cigarettes through vending machines and their sale in packets of fewer than 20 cigarettes.

Children and adolescents cannot smoke in public before the age of 16 in Germany and in 7 of the 9 provinces of Austria. In Luxembourg, the use of tobacco is banned in schools as well as other premises frequented by youngsters under the age of 16. The sale of tobacco products to those under 16 is banned in the UK, Ireland and Spain and in three of the nine Austrian provinces. In Sweden and Finland the ban is aimed at those under 18. There is no minimum age in the other EU countries which answered the questionnaire. – Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece and Portugal.

The use of automatic vending machines is banned in Belgium and subject to restrictions in Ireland. These machines are not to be found in Greece, and they have virtually disappeared from France. In Spain vending machines must be in private clubs and are out of bounds to those under 16. The situation is practically identical in the UK. Vending machines are allowed in Finland, but only under constant adult surveillance; in Sweden they must be in private clubs from which those under 18 years of age are banned. In Germany, the firms which handle vending machines take care to install them at least 50 metres from schools and youth centres, under the terms of an agreement reached with the authorities.

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The sale of cigarettes in packets of fewer than 20 units is banned in Ireland and Belgium, although this measure is to be amended shortly in both countries. In Denmark, cigarettes are on sale in packets of 10; indeed, this is the most popular packet in Sweden, where packets of 3 and 5 cigarettes make their appearance whenever new brands are launched. In the UK the sale of packets containing fewer than 20 cigarettes is allowed, provided that the packets contain a minimum of 10 cigarettes.

As for the ban on smoking in public places, the report focuses on the workplace; it is particularly in this area that EU member states have adopted measures in recent years. Finland appears to have the strictest regulations in this connection. Since 1995 there is a complete ban on smoking, except in the case of restaurant staff and people working alone. Smoking is allowed only in reserved areas, on condition that the smoke does not spread to non-smoking areas. At the beginning of this year the Finnish Parliament adopted a new law, which stipulates that from July, 2001, the area reserved for smokers in restaurants cannot be more than half the total area.

In France, offices and workshops must be laid out in such a way that non-smokers are not inconvenienced by smokers. In practice, one in 10 firms operates a total ban on smoking. In Denmark, the law on non-smoking areas affects the public sector only. Luxembourg has added hospitals in general and homes for the elderly to it. There is no law in the UK covering smoking at the workplace. But here, too, several member states failed to answer the questionnaire.

Tobacco smoke in the surrounding air will be classified as a cancerous agent in just one EU country – Finland – from next year. But the fight against tobacco addiction is becoming increasingly important in the EU. The fact is that since May, when the Treaty of Amsterdam came into force, the EU has greater competence in the field of public health. It is also worth pointing out that the tax on cigarettes must be a minimum of the sales price, set for the entire EU.

The fight against smoking is even becoming global : the World Health Organization (WHO) began discussions, at the end of October, on an international convention to limit tobacco consumption.

SOCIETY - Elderly people living alone are the most badly housed

A European report on housing conditions for those 65 years of age and over.

To be elderly and living alone can be bad enough; but it is much worse if, in addition, there is no running hot water, bath or shower. The fact is that elderly people living alone are more badly housed than others in the European Union (EU), according to a report published by Eurostat, the European statistical office, at the end of October.

In the EU as a whole, 28% of those aged between 65 and 79 were living on their own in 1995, the latest year for which detailed statistics are available. The proportion rose to 45% in the case of those aged 80 and over. While hardly one in three elderly persons on average was living alone in the EU as a whole, some 40% of them were in this situation in Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Germany, countries in which the number of people of all ages living on their own was already higher than in the other member states. In Spain and Portugal, on the other hand, the proportion of elderly people living alone dropped to under 20%.

Elderly people are less likely to be owner-occupiers, according to the report. In the EU as a whole, only one in two elderly persons living alone is an owner-occupier, although the proportion is more than two-thirds in the case of couples aged 65 and over. This is true of all EU countries. However, while only one in five elderly persons in the Netherlands is an owner-occupier, this is true of more than four in five elderly persons in Ireland and Greece.

More dramatic is the fact that more elderly people living on their own are without such basic amenities as running hot water, a bath or shower, and an indoor flushing toilet than other Europeans. Elderly people in general are more disadvantaged than others in this respect. In the EU as a whole, 5% of all households must do without at least one of these amenities; but this is the plight of 9% of households of people aged 65 and over. (The term «household» refers to one or more persons occupying the same accommodation.)

As for elderly people living on their own, 12% of them must do without at least one basic amenity - usually hot water, but often a bath or shower as well. While this is the case as regards 2% of the elderly in the UK and the Netherlands, and 4% in Denmark, the proportion rises to 21% in Ireland and Belgium and to 54% in Portugal.

Eurostat is of the view that the situation in Greece is also disturbing, although there are no firm figures – just as there are none for Finland and Sweden. Germany, France, Italy and Austria all exceed the EU average of 12%, which Spain just manages to reach. Luxembourg is below it, with 10%.

Despite their problems, elderly people complain less about their accommodation than younger ones, even if elderly people living alone are more dissatisfied than the others. Just 16% of people aged 65 and over in the EU claim to be unhappy with their accommodation, as compared to 18% of Europeans aged 16 and over. Only in Greece and Italy are the elderly more unhappy than on average ; together with Portugal these are also the countries with record levels of dissatisfaction over housing. At the other end of the spectrum lie Denmark, Luxembourg and the Netherlands.

HEALTH - The number of cases of AIDS is falling

The country most affected is Spain, the least affected is Finland.

The number of cases of AIDS is falling in the European Union (EU). There were 14,731 recorded cases in 1997, as against a record 24,294 cases in 1994 and over 20,000 in 1996. In several EU countries the number of cases peaked in 1995, while the following year saw a rise in numbers in Ireland, Greece and Portugal, according to the yearbook, « A statistical eye on Europe, » published by Eurostat, the European statistical office.

Spain was the EU country the most affected by AIDS, with an incidence rate of 127.5 cases per million inhabitants in 1997. This was well above the EU average of 31.3 cases per million inhabitants. The EU member states with the highest incidence rates after Spain were Portugal, Italy and France (in that order). Those with rates below the EU average were (in descending order) Luxembourg, the UK, Denmark, the Netherlands, Greece, Belgium, Austria, Germany, Sweden, Ireland and, finally, Finland, with just 3.7 cases per million inhabitants.

In the EU as a whole the largest transmission group in 1997 was of injecting drug addicts; they accounted for nearly 40% of diagnosed cases. Bisexual and homosexual males were next, with 35%. Some 10% to 15% of AIDS victims had contracted the disease through heterosexual contact. The origins of the disease in the remaining cases – fewer than 10% - could not be determined.

The situation varied a good deal from country to country as regards the method of transmission. Bisexual and homosexual males were in the clear majority in the north, particularly in the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, Finland and the UK. Those injecting themselves with drugs were in the majority in the southern EU countries – Spain, Italy and Portugal. Contamination through heterosexual contact was the leading cause of AIDS in Belgium.

TRAINING – Will languages come under the spotlight in 2001?

A proposal for a European Year of Languages.

You can benefit more from Europe if you know several European Union (EU) languages. This obviously is true when travelling in other member countries, for example, or settling down in one of them. But knowing more than one EU language can also help you get a better job at home. To put this message across to people in the 15 EU countries, the European Commission recently proposed to the European Parliament and EU Council of Ministers that 2001 be designated the European Year of Languages.

The Council of Europe, which brings together 41 countries, including the 15 EU member states, has already declared 2001 to be the «European Year of Languages.» Any EU initiative would be coordinated with the 41-member Council, of course. It would be aimed at the general public, and would include numerous local, regional, national and cross-border projects. There would be activities aimed specifically at the unemployed, those living in areas where languages overlap, and language teachers.

The Commission has proposed a total budget of EUR 8 million*. It will be recalled that some four years ago the European Commission had proposed that, in the long run, all European citizens should learn to speak two EU languages, in addition to their mother tongue.

* 1 EUR = UK £0.65 or IR £0.79.

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