



NEWS ITEMS OF GENERAL INTEREST

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Articles of immediate interest to readers, ready for publication.

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CHILDREN'S HEALTH – Safer toys in soft PVC in sight...

...as the European Union seeks to protect children against phthalates.

Children under three years will soon be free of the risk of permanent damage to their kidneys or liver from sucking on an ordinary teething ring or dummy. Within just a few weeks rattles, dummies, teething rings and similar toys made from PVC which has been softened with certain chemicals, should no longer be on sale in the European Union (EU). The chemicals in question are phthalates, which can have harmful effects once mixed with saliva and swallowed by children.

The European Commission recently decided to ban the sale of toys containing these chemicals which babies suck on or bite. The decision, which should come into force in early December, is part of a package of measures aimed at safeguarding the health of the very young.

Since last year we know that some phthalates, which are used to soften plastics, are a danger to very young children. In July, 1998, a European recommendation called on EU member states to take safety measures, pending the results of European scientific studies. Eight of the 15 EU* countries decided to limit the use of phthalates in toys and other articles meant for the very young.

Recent scientific evidence, published at the end of September, has shown that the tests currently in use in the EU are not sufficiently reliable to allow unsafe toys to be weeded out. This means there can be no question of setting authorized limit values for the presence of phthalates in toys, as some authorities had envisaged.

The European Commission is therefore proposing to the European Parliament and EU Council of Ministers a definitive regulation, to ensure children's safety. But its adoption and entry into force will take two to three years. Hence the decision to introduce an immediate ban. Contacts with manufacturers, retailers and national control agencies should ensure the rapid removal from shops of the toys in question, once representatives of EU member states have given their opinion.

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The definitive system proposed by the Commission would permanently ban the use of the phthalates in question in toys, such as rattles and teething rings, made from soft PVC and meant to be sucked or chewed on by children under three years of age. It would also require manufacturers to put a warning label on toys made from soft PVC and containing phthalates but which are not intended to be put in the mouth, although children may well do so as they "explore" their world.

Parents would be warned that the toy in question "must not be put in the mouth for long periods of time, as phthalates dangerous for the health of children could be released". In the event that such labelling is not possible for technical reasons, the packaging would carry the following warning: "Must not be put in the mouth during long periods of time."

* Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy and Sweden.

INFORMATION SOCIETY – The Internet and GSM to become more accessible to everyone ?

European suggestions and projects for the year 2000 and beyond.

Will the cost of Internet access and of international telephone calls from mobile phones soon come down? These are two of the benefits to consumers which should flow from the next phase in the liberalization of telecommunications in the 15-nation European Union (EU). This new phase is foreseen by the European Commission in several recent reports, in which it both analyses the application of existing European rules and looks to the future.

For several years now the EU has been promoting greater competition in the telecoms sector in order to bring down the cost of telephone calls and to encourage job creation in the promising new technology sectors. The most important date, in this connection, so far has been 1 January 1998, when the monopoly traditionally enjoyed by national telephone companies came to an end in most EU countries. The EU has sought to ensure, at the same time, that consumers and manufacturers benefit from a European area free of technical frontiers, thanks to the GSM standard for mobile phones, for example.

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In practice, the price of phone calls from fixed telephones has fallen, particularly for international calls. As for mobile phones, the existence in each EU country of at least two mobile telephone companies has led to lower rates. What is more, intervention by EU authorities has on occasion put an end to practices which penalized users.

At the same time, all information society activities, such as computerization, telecoms and the Internet, have undergone an extraordinary development in Europe. As a result, one new job in four is currently in this sector. In 1997 the number of new jobs in the information society sector increased by nearly 9%, as against under 1% in the case of all the other sectors put together.

But much remains to be done. EU rules are not applied in the same way in all EU countries, and local calls in particular remain generally in the hands of the former monopolies. Internet access consequently remains relatively expensive. Besides, it is in the EU countries where access is the cheapest, as in the Nordic member states, that the proportion of people connected to the Internet is the highest, generally speaking.

The European Commission plans to act rapidly in this area. The Commission similarly would like the EU to allow users to choose their company for international calls from mobile phones, and for fixed telephones in general. This would bring down prices.

FOOD – 157 experts to ensure that European rules are respected

The EU's Food and Veterinary Office keeps a watch on our safety.

Can we be absolutely sure of what we eat and drink every day? In recent years millions of Europeans have been questioning the safety of the food and drink they once took as a matter of course. Questions are often being asked about the role of the government of one or other European Union (EU) member state in ensuring food safety. Is it doing all it can to protect the health of its citizens?

A little-known EU institution is monitoring food safety. It is the Food and Veterinary Office, based just outside Dublin, whose 157 experts see to it that national authorities respect EU rules. Clearly the quality and safety of our food depend in large measure on the unfailing application of European rules on food hygiene, when it comes to our meat, fruit, vegetables and other foodstuffs. Governments have the responsibility of implementing EU rules on a day-to-day basis. The authorities in non-EU countries must also implement them if they want to sell food to us.

There is always a risk that implementation will vary from country to country, and will not be entirely satisfactory at all times. This is one of the lessons to be drawn from events in recent years, such as the emergence of "mad cow" disease and the use of sewage sludge in animal feed.

It explains why the EU set up a Food and Veterinary Office in 1997. The Office, which meets a public need, reports directly to the European Commission's department on health and consumer protection. It has replaced an earlier inspection and control unit, which was responsible to the Commission's agriculture department.

The Office began work with a staff of 79, including 52 inspectors. It now has 157 employees, including 91 inspectors. Their numbers should rise to 180 next year. The work of the inspectors is based at present on two European laws adopted last year. Under one they carry out inspections within the EU, under the other they make inspection visits to non-EU countries.

Their brief covers foodstuffs, whether from animals or plants, banned substances and residues, the health of animals and plants produced for human consumption, as well as animal welfare.

The inspectors can visit farms, factories, slaughterhouses as well as national and regional control centres, in order to make sure that EU rules are being respected.

The European Office notifies those in charge that the visits will take place, and the national authorities have to cooperate. But once the inspectors have arrived, they have the right to choose the establishments to be visited, with or without the cooperation of the EU member state in question. They have had no difficulties so far.

If the inspectors come across an irregularity which presents a threat to public health, they can ask the member state concerned to close down the establishment in question. If there is no immediate danger, the inspectors ask the national authorities to rectify the irregularities within a certain period of time. In exceptional cases they may remove samples for analysis.

In its daily activities the Office is independent of both national and European authorities. As all its reports are available on the Internet. They are easily accessible to all who have an interest in the matter, including consumer organizations. Last but not least, all the inspectors must be extremely knowledgeable and professional. Many of them in fact are experienced veterinary surgeons, biologists and agronomists. New recruits to the Office are given special training.

SPORT - The European Union is at the heart of the fight against doping

At stake: the health of young people.

Athletic, swimming and cycling stars have made the headlines and featured on television news programmes because they took drugs to enhance their performance. But doping concerns not only stars, many of them fabulously wealthy, but also thousands of young and not-so-young Europeans, for it is a health problem, a point which the European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies underlines in a recent report. The fact is that the European Union (EU) is finding itself increasingly involved in the fight against doping, both in Europe and in the world, where an international agency has just been set up.

But what is doping? For the European Group on Ethics, an independent committee of experts from several EU countries, it is the use, in order to improve sporting performance, of substances, quantities or methods which are banned, mainly because of their potential harmful effect on the health of sportsmen and sportswomen, but also because they are likely to endanger the generally accepted terms on which loyalty to sport is based. The complexity of the problem is evident from the length of this definition. Besides, it seems difficult to reach agreement on a definition of doping.

In its report, the European Group on Ethics has stressed the protection of the health of sportsmen and sportswomen in general, and of children in particular. Even though the most spectacular cases of doping in sport involve professionals, the line between them and successful amateurs is seldom very clear. What is more, young amateur sportsmen and sportswomen can fall under the spell of stars they admire, even when the latter use performance-enhancing substances.

Roughly 125 million Europeans – or one EU inhabitant in four – take part in sporting activities. Not with equal dedication, however. While more than 80% of adult Finns practise a sport, in one way or another, the proportion drops to 23% in Italy. Children and adolescents engage in competitive sports in very large numbers. In Sweden, more than half the children between the ages of 6 and 11 practise competitive sports, or at least take part in sports in an organized context. This is also true of one youngster in three in Finland, roughly one in five in the UK and the Netherlands, and one in 10 in Italy.

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Participation levels are even more impressive in the case of youngsters between the ages of 12 and 16 years: three out of four engage in competitive sports in Finland, one in three in the UK and the Netherlands and nearly one in five in Italy.

Nine EU countries already have special laws designed to protect sportsmen and sportswomen from the dangers of doping. They are: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain and Sweden. Broadly speaking, these laws ban sportsmen and sportswomen from taking certain substances, particularly hormone derivatives and stimulants. In the six remaining EU countries, legislation on pharmaceutical products has roughly the same effect, although it does not necessarily cover all performance-enhancing drugs.

At the EU level, the treaties which represent the Union's constitution provide for measures to combat drugs in general as well as their harmful effects. Under EU rules, professional sportsmen and sportswomen are treated as workers who have the right to conduct their activities in all member states. The EU's scientific research programme also has a role to play.

The European Group on Ethics has recommended a dozen measures to the EU, all of them designed to combat doping on several fronts. The most broad-based of these measures is a European code of good conduct in sport. The code would be adopted by all interested individuals and organizations, including sportsmen and sportswomen, sporting associations, the EU and its member states, organizations representing the medical profession and pharmaceutical industry, bodies representing young people and families, and television stations.

The Group on Ethics has recommended, from a health standpoint, the adoption of a directive, or European law, on the protection of children and adolescents who practise sport, and more particularly those who plan to compete in sports or are already competing actively. This law would protect young people, in the same way, as it were, as the regulations on child labour, even while making sure that they are not manipulated by unscrupulous coaches, clubs and sponsors.

As regards professional sportsmen and sportswomen, the experts have recommended the introduction of specific provisions in EU regulations aimed at protecting the health and safety of workers.

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The Group wants first class sportsmen and sportswomen to receive information on the dangers of doping as of right, as part of their contract. It has also called for the preparation of a code of good conduct for sports medicine, in order to prevent it from being diverted from its goal, and the distinction between medicines and substances used for doping from being easily crossed.

The European experts favour anti-doping checks, carried out independently of the sports federations. They believe it would be necessary to set up a European reference laboratory, which would coordinate a network of approved European laboratories, in liaison with the European Agency for the Evaluation of Medicaments.

As regards scientific research, the Group on Ethics takes the view that the European research programmes should be used to study the relationship between the race to improve performance, on the one hand, and health on the other. The programmes should also alert school teachers to the link between performance and health. A recent report from the International Olympics Committee envisages improved methods of detecting the use of performance-enhancing drugs and the training of those involved in combating this scourge.

Given the vast sums of money now involved in professional sport, the European experts suggest that this veritable industry help pay for the fight against doping. The number of people employed by the sports sector in the EU has been put at between 1.5 million to 2 million.

*Please contact us by fax or e-mail if you would like copies of the documents
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