



## NEWS ITEMS OF GENERAL INTEREST

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Articles of immediate interest to readers, ready for publication.

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## **FOOD – Keeping dioxin away from the food chain**

### **A European regulation to ensure safer animal feed.**

In the continuing struggle to ensure that food remains safe in the European Union the European Commission has set a limit on the amount of dioxin that there may be in kaolinitic clay. This clay is sometimes used in animal feed as a binder and anti-caking agent.

When in June it had looked as if dioxin might enter the food chain from kaolinitic clay that comes from Germany, the Commission had taken immediate preventive action. Excessive quantities of dioxin had then been found in such clays. The dioxin in question was of natural origin.

To avoid this dangerous substance entering the food chain, as happened in Belgium a few months ago, the Commission has now adopted a regulation - a European Union law - laying down the maximum amount of dioxin that there may safely be in this kaolinitic clay.

For the time being, the EU and its member states have banned the use of these contaminated clays and of the animal feed containing them. At the same time samples of meat from animals fed with contaminated feed are being analyzed for their dioxin content.

Under the new EU regulation, member states can no longer authorize the use of kaolinitic clays containing more than 0.5 nanograms – that is, 0.5 billionth of a gram - of dioxin per kilogram of product. The measure is a provisional one, and scientists will continue to assess the health risk..

As dioxin contamination may enter other clays used in the preparation of animal feed, scientists will look into this aspect of the problem also. This is why the new regulation will apply from next March 1 to all clays authorized for use. The maximum limit will remain unchanged if no fresh evidence is revealed by the studies.

## **COMBATING SMOKING – More outspoken labelling of tobacco products...**

### **...and lower tar levels for cigarettes, under an EU proposal.**

"Smoking kills," European Commissioner David Byrne said when presenting a proposal aimed at protecting people from "the negative effects of smoking". Many Europeans know this already; some learnt it the hard way, after seeing someone close to them die from a smoking-related illness. All cigarettes on sale in the European Union (EU) should soon carry stronger warnings, such as "Smoking can kill" or "Smoking kills", printed in bigger type face than the present health warnings, such as "Smoking causes heart disease and strokes". The level of harmful substances present in cigarettes would also be reduced.

These are some of the measures contained in a proposal which the European Commission sent to the European Parliament and EU Council of Ministers in mid-November. The aim is to protect people from the negative effects of smoking more effectively by tightening up existing directives, or European laws, on the composition and packaging of cigarettes.

The Commission's proposal seeks to warn the public more bluntly against the dangers of smoking. The main warning – "Smoking kills", for example – would have to be printed on the front side of the packet, in clearer and bigger type than at present, and on a white background, surrounded by a black border. The warning would take up at least a quarter of the side – and even more of it in countries with two or three official languages.

An additional warning, printed and laid out in the same way, would appear on the reverse side of the packet. In each EU country the competent authorities could choose from a list of eight warning messages, including "Smokers die younger", "Smoking causes cancer" and "Smoking is addictive". Additional health warnings include "Smoking when pregnant harms your baby" and "Protect children: don't make them breathe your smoke".

The two warnings would be printed indelibly and so placed that they could not be covered or separated when the packet was opened. The laws and regulations implementing this labelling system would come into effect not later than 31 December 2001 in every EU country. Cigarette packets already on sale on that date could continue to be sold during a 2-year period, even if they did not meet the new requirements.

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The Commission's proposal contains another change in presentation. Manufacturers could no longer use, as they saw fit, terms such as "low tar", "light", "mild" and so on. Their use, which has been shown to mislead consumers into thinking that the products in question were less harmful to health, would be banned in principle in the EU. However, every member state could authorize their use under well-defined conditions.

The proposal also seeks to reduce levels of harmful substances in cigarettes. If it were adopted, the maximum tar level would fall from 12mg to 10mg per cigarette by 31 December 2003 at the latest. Tar is responsible for lung cancer. EU countries would also introduce a ceiling of 1mg of nicotine and a maximum of 10mg of carbon monoxide per cigarette by the same date. Nicotine creates dependency, while carbon monoxide in cigarettes is linked to the incidence and onset of cardiovascular disease.

The European Commission's draft directive would also require cigarette manufacturers to notify smokers of the presence of ingredients other than tobacco, including additives, and to carry out tests in order to measure the amounts of the ingredients in question. The proposed directive provides for special labelling in the case of chewing tobacco, which is allowed in only one EU country, Sweden.

The European Commission submitted its proposal after having consulted all interested parties over the last three years, including the European Parliament and EU Council of Ministers. They must now consider it and then, hopefully, adopt it.

## **DRUGS – The EU has between 1 million and 1.5 million addicts**

### **The spotlight is on heroin. Prevention rather than repression.**

More than 40 million Europeans are said to have tried cannabis at least once; but the number of "regular" drug users in the European Union (EU) has been put at between 1 million and 1.5 million, out of a total population of about 375 million. They are the ones who have become dependent on illicit drugs and run the risk of contracting a disease or having an accident. Most of the "regular" users are addicted to heroin.

These are among the findings of the latest annual report on the drugs problem in the EU, published recently by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), an organ of the EU based in Lisbon.

In most member states the authorities recognize increasingly the need for prevention, and are less inclined to rely on repressive measures alone. While member states continue to ban the possession and use of illicit drugs in principle, many of them feel that putting drug offenders in prison can only make the situation worse.

The attitude of the authorities often is to favour prevention for users and sanctions for dealers, even if both roles are combined on occasion in the same person. The trend is to pursue less vigorously than before those found in possession of small quantities of cannabis, for example. But the legalisation of certain illicit drugs does not appear to be on the agenda.

The number of people who risk their health or their lives by taking illicit drugs remains roughly the same in most EU countries. Although new cases appear, a roughly equal number of drug addicts either give up the habit or die. The typical "regular" drug user is a man, between 24 and 33 years of age.

The largest number of drug addicts of this type are to be found in Italy and Luxembourg – roughly 8 addicts per 1,000 inhabitants, aged 15 and over. The UK is not far behind, with nearly 7 addicts per 1,000 inhabitants. Germany, Austria, Finland and Sweden are at the other end of the spectrum, with roughly 3 per 1,000 inhabitants.

In recent years, between 6,000 and 7,000 Europeans have died each year from an overdose, generally of heroin. The number of such deaths appears to have peaked in the early 1990s in most EU countries, and has been falling since then. The report points out that those who inject themselves with drugs have a 20 to 30 times higher risk of dying prematurely than those of equal age who do not take drugs.

Heroin users are generally people living in precarious conditions in large cities. But the use of heroin, the main drug which is causing havoc in the EU, is now finding its way into small towns and rural areas. Its victims, more or less everywhere, are either relatively affluent young people, who are already using ecstasy or amphetamines, or alcoholics.

The quantities of heroin seized in the EU each year amount to some 5 to 6 tonnes; nearly half the seizures are in the UK. EMCDDA has put the number of people who have tried heroin at least once at between 3 million to 5 million, or roughly 1% of the EU population.

Synthetic drugs, and ecstasy in particular, are linked to a mass recreation and music culture known as "rave" or "techno", and to night clubs and evenings spent dancing to "techno" music. These drugs are manufactured in underground laboratories in a number of EU countries, including the UK, Spain and the Netherlands, as well as Poland. Their production and distribution is in the hands of criminal organizations. In the UK alone, more than one million doses of ecstasy are believed to be sold in night clubs every weekend.

The EMCDDA report notes that alcohol consumption tends to rise during "techno" evenings, as a result of publicity campaigns and the sponsorship of certain manufacturers. The resulting mixture is often explosive. Another growing risk is the sale of pills which have been modified and are sold as ecstasy pills. Lastly, the consumption of amphetamines and cocaine appears to be rising in recreational settings.

Cocaine has been tried by 1% to 3% of all European adults. It is more popular than amphetamines in Spain and France, contrary to other EU countries. The quantities of cocaine seized in the EU peaked at 38 tonnes in 1997, with the largest seizures being made in Spain. Cocaine is often used as a second drug by heroin addicts although, taken by itself, it seldom results in death.

Cannabis is by far the most widely used illicit drug in the EU; more than 40 million Europeans have tried it at least once. The plant, called cannabis or marijuana, must not be confused, however, with hashish, the resin extracted from its buds and flowers. Nearly 40% of young adults in the UK, Denmark and Spain have already used it. Cannabis usage increased during the early 1990s, but has stabilized since then. Just how dangerous is cannabis, when driving a car, for example? Opinions vary a good deal among scientists, magistrates, policemen and others who come in contact with the drug because of their profession.

Since the mid-1980s the number of arrests for drug offences has risen considerably. It was up twofold in Denmark and Italy, for example, and sixfold in Belgium, Greece, Spain, Portugal and Finland. Cannabis is the drug most often involved in arrests. Depending on the country, drug offenders account for between 15% and 50% of the total jail population in the EU, while drug use is reported in the case of 30% to 90% of prisoners.

The distinction between licit and illicit drugs is no longer clearcut, the EMCDDA's report points out. Many observers and professionals are questioning the need to retain the difference between illicit drugs, such as cannabis and cocaine, and authorized substances, such as tobacco and alcohol, on the one hand, and medicines used as drugs, such as tranquilisers. Often problems arise when these various substances are mixed - something that is happening increasingly, comments the EMCDDA..

## TRANSPORT – The Irish drive more than other Europeans...

### **...but Danes are by far the most mobile.**

Travel within the European Union (EU) is very easy, whether it is by car, bus or train. But transport has not been conceived in the same way throughout the EU, and each country has its preferences and habits. The Irish and Danes, for example, use their cars more than anyone else in the EU, while the Austrians are in the lead when it comes to using trains.

These are among the findings of a report on transport in the EU published recently by Eurostat, the European Union's statistical office, and the European Commission. The Irish and Danes drive the most of all EU inhabitants. They covered 12,000 km per person by car in 1996, the latest year for which this information is available. They led the French (more than 11,500 km per person per year) as well as the Italians, British and Portuguese, who were all below the EU average of 10,038 km per year. The Austrians drive the least, covering just over 8,000 km per year.

The Austrians are in the lead, however, when it comes to travel by train. Each of them covered 1,224 km on average in 1996, beating the French into second place (1,024 km). Next in terms of train travel were the Danes, Italians, Dutch and Germans – they all covered distances of more than 749 km – the EU average – in 1996. The other EU countries were below the EU average. Even so, the Irish managed 357 km per person per year, as against just 167 km in the case of the Greeks. But Ireland and Greece are countries with the least dense railway networks.

Travel by coach and bus is most popular with the Danes, who managed 2,090 km per person in 1996. This put them well ahead of the Italians (1,509 km) and very far ahead of the average EU inhabitant, who managed just 981 km. Even so, the Greeks were well in the rear, with just 544 km.

The use of private cars simply surged ahead in the EU between 1970 and 1996. The fact is that the average number of km per person per year more than doubled. The increase was greatest in Greece, Spain and Portugal, thanks to an improved road network and a sharp rise in car ownership.

The railways, meanwhile, fared rather less well in the EU. The number of kilometres travelled per person per year rose by just 29%. The biggest increases were recorded in the Netherlands, Austria, Luxembourg and Finland.

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The most "mobile" of all EU citizens are the Danes, when it comes to transport by road, rail and river. Each of them covered 41.3 km per day on average in 1996. The Greeks and Spaniards came last, with less than 28 km per day. Austrians use public transport the most, Greeks the least.

### **INFLATION – Prices rose slightly faster in October...**

**...to 1.3% on a yearly basis in the European Union.**

Prices rose somewhat faster in October in the European Union (EU). As a result, the rate of inflation went up from 1.2% in September to 1.3%, calculated on an annual basis. The October inflation rate for the 11-nation euro area\* was 1.4%. Inflation in the EU as a whole stood at 1.1% the previous October, according to Eurostat, the European statistical office.

France and Austria continued to enjoy the lowest inflation rate in the EU (0.8%) in October. Germany recorded 0.9%, Sweden 1% and the UK 1.2%. Countries with rates above the EU average included Belgium (1.4%), Finland (1.6%), the Netherlands and Portugal (1.8%), followed by Greece, Italy and Luxembourg (1.9%), Spain (2.4%), Denmark (2.6%) and Ireland (2.8%).

*\* Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain.*

*Please contact us by fax or e-mail if you would like copies of the documents used in the preparation of Eurofocus articles.*

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