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Life-course

2 Life-course approach

The Swiss Government introduced its National Strategy for the Prevention of Non-communicable Diseases (NCD Strategy) in April of this year. One of the aims of the strategy is to reduce the number of avoidable cases of such illnesses by empowering people, whatever their social status, to enjoy a healthy lifestyle. Non-communicable diseases are often causally associated with a wide range of risk factors such as an unbalanced diet or smoking, but also with social factors such as level of education. This complexity means that prevention efforts have to address the problem from the broad-based standpoint that the life-course approach employs. This is described in the current issue of spectra.

2 Organ donation campaign

As in other countries, demand for organs in Switzerland exceeds supply. Waiting lists for organs are therefore getting longer every year: 1,370 at the end of the year 2014, compared with 635 in 2004. Opinion polls show that the majority of people living in Switzerland have a basically positive view of organ transplantation: 80 percent can imagine donating an organ. But no more than 14 percent possess a donor card. Under the motto of "Talking about organ donation", the aim of the 2016–2020 campaign is to persuade people not only to address the subject of organ donation, but also to talk about it openly with their families and always share their will regarding organ donation with them.

4 Alcohol prevention campaign

The message in efforts to prevent smoking is clear: every cigarette is harmful and every cigarette smoked is one too many. Alcohol prevention requires another approach: it needs to communicate a more differentiated message since, from the health viewpoint, an occasional glass of wine or beer does no harm. The basic question with alcohol is therefore: how much is too much? At what point do we become embarrassing, irresponsible or even a danger to others? The current alcohol prevention campaign calls on the Swiss public to reflect on their alcohol consumption and on their behaviour when under the influence of alcohol.

People should be able to enjoy the best possible health in every phase

Life-course approach. The life-course approach is attracting growing interest among health professionals. Comprehensive overviews such as the UN's "Agenda 2030" Strategy on Sustainable Development, the WHO European Region's "Health 2020" framework or the Swiss government's health policy strategy of the same name are geared in part to the life-course approach. Moreover, the WHO European Region hosted a ministerial conference on the topic of the life-course approach last autumn. What is behind this approach and what makes it so interesting for prevention experts?

The life-course approach is characterised by its very broad viewpoint. It employs a perspective on the health of the individual that takes both time and societal aspects into account and also includes cross-generational determinants of health. It views health as a process rather than as a state. These factors include genetic material and the setting into which we are born and/or in which we live. This setting is shaped in part by our parents' socio-economic circum-

stances and educational background, environmental factors, working conditions, societal norms and general political and cultural conditions.

In April, the Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH), the cantons and the Swiss Health Promotion Foundation presented their Strategy for the Prevention of Non-communicable Diseases (NCD Strategy). The strategy features the life-course approach – besides the setting and the target group approaches – as one of the three approaches to promoting protective factors and reducing those that represent a risk.

Investing in a lifetime's health and wellbeing

The life-course approach takes the entire life-span and divides it into different life segments that are of particular relevance to health. In childhood the focus is on healthy growth and development, while in adolescence the development of a healthy lifestyle is key. In adulthood the focus is on safeguarding health and avoiding illnesses in general, but also on maintaining fitness to work and protecting social participation. In advanced age the emphasis is on maintaining quality of life and independence. This includes learning to live with limitations and

thereby staying able, as much and for as long as possible, to hold on to independence and cultivate a social setting despite the loss of family members and friends. It is therefore important to invest in health and wellbeing in all life segments.

A multidimensional approach

The life-course approach therefore requires us to understand which factors harm health in the different life segments, which protect it and which promote it – and this all the way from birth to advanced age. To achieve this goal, it draws on a wealth of findings from a broad spectrum of scientific disciplines and political fields. These range from all medical specialties, psychology, sociology and ecology to law and political sciences.

Thus, a health policy committed to the life-course approach aims not only to examine specific needs and illnesses of individuals in narrowly defined life phases, but also to cover the entire life-span prospectively and create general health-promoting conditions that also benefit subsequent generations. Depending on the life phase, various life settings (family, school, workplace, etc.) have an important bearing on people's health, as do professionals and those

close to them. These can have a beneficial influence on lifestyle and general health-promoting conditions. For infants and toddlers, for instance, midwives, parenting counsellors, paediatricians or people from the immediate personal environment are key contacts for advice on questions of nutrition and child care, while the equivalents for adolescents tend to be found in schools and leisure-time organisations.

A healthy start in life

One of the most important phases for people's subsequent health course is their start in life. Many studies show that environmental factors already play a key role in the conception and development of the child in the mother's womb. For instance, the father's alcohol consumption and the mother's eating habits prior to conception or during pregnancy can have an effect on the child's genetic material. Likewise, a child that is well cared for physically, materially and emotionally in the first few months of life and can develop in a stimulating environment has a better chance of living a healthy life. Furthermore, the majority of brain cells are formed in the first three years of life – a further indication that measures to pro-

Donate organs? "Say what you think is important!"

Organ donation campaign 2016–2020. The new organ donation campaign focuses on discussion, communication and sharing. It is aimed at sensitising the general public into talking about the subject of organ transplantation with family and friends, reaching a decision for or against organ donation and communicating this decision. Only those who express their will can be sure that their decision will be respected by their relatives. The FOPH is launching the campaign in cooperation with the Swisstransplant foundation.

Opinion polls show that the majority of people living in Switzerland have a basically positive view of organ transplantation: 80 percent can imagine donating an organ, but no more than 14 percent possess a donor card. Many have not yet made up their minds, nor have they informed their families of their wishes. The aim of the 2016–2020 campaign is to persuade people to address the subject of organ donation, reach a decision on it and inform their families accordingly. In cases in which the will of the deceased is not known, their families are asked to decide. This makes an already difficult situation all the more trying for them.

New website, new TV commercial

The new website, www.leben-ist-teilen.ch, and a new key image that underpins the principal message – the appeal to share



and communicate – are central elements of the campaign. Among other material, the revamped organ donor card and the associated brochure can be ordered or downloaded from the website. A new feature is a duplicate donor card that can be passed on to families as documentation and as a reminder. The TV commercial is a further new element: It shows people who, in out-of-the-ordinary situations, are courageous enough to raise the subject of something they consider important. "Say what you think is important. Any time. Any place" is the appeal. To have a better chance of reaching younger age-groups, the new campaign makes greater use of social media than before. The aim is to multi-

ply the decisions of individuals into a movement that, in the course of the campaign, will draw in more and more people and prompt them, too, to make up their minds about organ donation.

Further partners welcome

The campaign benefits from a strong partner in the shape of the Swisstransplant foundation. Further partners such as medical practices, pharmacies or drugstores will be integrated into the campaign over the next four years. As it is, a range of material such as dispensers containing organ donation brochures or stickers for window displays can already be ordered from www.leben-ist-teilen.ch.

"More Organs for Transplantations" action plan

The organ donation campaign is enshrined in the "More Organs for Transplantations" action plan, which in turn is part of the Swiss Government's overall "Health 2020" strategic agenda. The action plan aims to utilise the potential for organ donation more effectively and increase the donation rate.

Link: www.leben-ist-teilen.ch

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more healthy development need to be taken as early as possible. Thus, investment in health promotion in general and in parenting and pregnancy in particular is of exceptional importance. Measures undertaken in early childhood (early promotion of development) are

also among the most (cost-)effective approaches used in health policy and also in social and educational policies. However, for such measures to be able to work, they must be implemented in a health-promoting environment and be accepted by those closest to the young children. This means that health literacy needs to be strengthened in all life phases. Development in early childhood is not simply the responsibility of the mother and father; it is a task for society as a whole.

Focus on transitional phases

The life-course approach assumes that the current health of individuals, prevailing general conditions and current lifestyle have far-reaching consequences for future health. Particular attention needs to be paid to critical transitional phases in the life-course, which often predetermine developments in later life. Puberty, for instance, is one of these transitional phases. It provides an opportunity to strengthen young people's

health literacy and thereby help them make decisions that have positive consequences for their health. This includes the adoption or avoidance of risk-related or addictive behaviour or the development of powers of resistance and the ability to overcome adverse conditions. Additional far-reaching transitions that are of relevance to health (founding a family, settling into a career, dealing with work-related crises, etc.) also occur when individuals become working adults. In later life, transitions such as retirement from work or the onset of physical or mental handicaps are among the critical phases in which people can be given targeted support in maintaining their health and quality of life as much and as long as possible. Longer life expectancy is steadily prolonging the post-retirement life-phase, and growing numbers of people are being given an opportunity to shape their lives during these years and decades in good health. Good retirement provision makes this easier! In addition, specific events in people's lives, such as traumatic childhood experiences, job loss, separation, life crises or the death of close relatives or friends, can have long-term consequences for their health. Life transitions – and also profound experiences – require effective coping strategies. Health promotion and prevention can offer measures that help people to overcome difficult life situations and maintain or regain a healthy lifestyle.

Consequences for health policy

Swiss health policy in the fields of prevention and health promotion focuses on two aspects: personal responsibility

for health and the personal behaviour this requires, and the creation of general health-promoting conditions. The well informed are able to maintain and protect their health. But favourable general conditions are important because they help "make the healthy choice the easier choice". Rather than people having decisions taken out of their hands, they should be supported in finding a lifestyle that is conducive to health. After all, not all people are equally able to shape their lives in a health-conscious way in every life phase. Health is influenced not only by personal decisions but also by a range of determinants such as living conditions, education, working conditions and the organisation of the healthcare system and social security. These health determinants can change over a life-course, gaining or losing importance.

Activities on an international level: WHO declaration of intent signed

In autumn 2015, a Ministerial Conference organised by the WHO European Region was held on the topic of the life-course approach. A Swiss delegation participated in the event. At the professional level, the conference was an opportunity for Switzerland to keep abreast of current approaches in this field. At the end of the conference, all participating states, including Switzerland, signed a declaration of intent. Among other things, they committed to evaluate their programmes and policies focused on the life-course approach and to select and deliver high-impact interventions.

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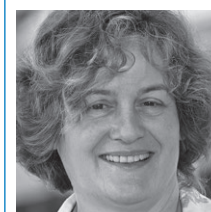
At first hand

Ever more people are suffering from non-communicable diseases (NCD) such as cancer or diabetes. These conditions are a heavy burden not only on the patients and their families but also on our healthcare system.

If we want to understand why people fall ill, we need to broaden our focus, taking in not only their present circumstances and illness but also their entire life history. This is because the behaviour, events and experiences of each phase of life – whether early childhood, adolescence, adulthood, or advanced age – have a lasting impact on health. In addition, specific transitional events such as pregnancy, divorce or change of job have an impact on health and on behaviour relevant to health. We therefore need to take a global view, examining people's entire physical and social environment, work setting and political and economic situation. This comprehensive understanding is key to our being able to develop measures that combat the increase in non-communicable diseases effectively and sustainably.

Specialists agree that the development of the child in the mother's womb and the first five years of life play an immensely important part in determining our future health. But this does not mean that an ideal start in life makes us immune to health risks. Nor does a bad start mean that all hope is lost. Whatever our age, we can always choose the path of health – be it by engaging in more physical activity in everyday life, drinking less alcohol or stopping smoking. It is never too late to maximise our own health potential and thereby boost our chances of staying active and fit to a ripe old age. People's health can always be improved. We aim to deploy this knowledge in future prevention and health promotion activities. We want to create general conditions that make it easier for people to become self-empowered and well informed enough always to opt for the path of health and wellbeing.

We are committed to improving the health of babies, children and adolescents, to keeping adults healthy for as long as possible and to minimising loss of quality of life and health in the elderly. These are the ambitious goals we have set ourselves in the national NCD Strategy and the "Health 2020" strategy.



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Infographic

Age structure of Switzerland's population

Source: Swiss Federal Statistical Office



