

Main contributions from the 2nd International Sport Countries Conference on Health and Sport Policies (Barcelona, November 24-27, 2008)

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The 2nd International Sport Countries Conference on Health and Sport Policies was organized in Barcelona by the Vice-presidential Department of the Government of Catalonia, and led by the Steering Committee of the Sport Countries Network. About 150 participants from 28 countries attended the event — 20 of whom were from governmental departments responsible for sport and health policies.

This conference intended to respond to the call made at the 12th World Sport for All Congress, held in Malaysia on 3-6 November 2008, under the patronage of the International Olympic Committee.

1. The conference confirmed the trend towards increased physical inactivity in most countries, in spite of the high level of sports practice in some of them. This declining physical activity among the population is associated with an increase of certain pathologies, such as obesity, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, specific types of cancer and, in general, toxic habits among the population.

Physical inactivity issue is considered a more severe factor than obesity —nowadays it entails an increase in health systems costs, which could significantly be reduced through an appropriate prevention policy.

Physical inactivity affects especially the feminine population, which justifies a specific gender approach on this issue. Physical inactivity also produces concrete problems in developing countries and among the poorest social groups.

The predominance of physical inactivity is confirmed in spite of the good levels of sport practice among the population of some countries. In this sense, society seldom associates high performance sport with health, and individual demand for physical activity in specialized centres is not an element determining any significant increase in the activity level among the population.

2. To counter the decreasing physical activity, the existence of two approaches or models was mentioned during the conference:

- The governmental initiative developed through both private and public bodies specialized in implementing programs to promote physical activity for a better health. This model is especially applied in countries lacking of a sufficient public health network.
- The planning of health public policies as operational system, considering the objective of reaching healthy living as a priority on the political agenda.

3. The conference considered that the foundations of actions in favour of an active society are:

- Physical activity as a right for all. Everybody shall get the necessary means to enjoy an active life. However, people also have the personal and social obligation of maintaining healthy habits.

- According to the WHO, the health is not only the absence of illness —it is a positive concept related to the quality of life, involving a good level of physical activity and appropriate eating.
- To bring people closer to physical activity, not only the persons shall be considered but also their social and physical environment.
- Education systems and schools have an important impact in the promotion of physical activity and healthy habits among youth. This must be considered as a priority strategic sector.
- Sport associations network is relevant to implement programs to improve physical activity and nutrition.
- Orderly actions are required according to three concepts —prevention, research, and treatment.

4. The Conference also considered as main objectives of the programs:

- To change behaviours, lifestyles, as well as personal and social habits through an appropriate information on possible benefits of adequate physical activity.
- To change the rules and values of a country —its rationale.
- To build community capacity to efficiently implement public and private initiatives.
- To determine which is the most motivating activity for every person, and the most appropriate for every age, according to gender incidence, as well as to the different social networks.

5. In order to achieve these objectives, the conference considered as necessary means:

- Transversal policies applied by the different governmental ministries —health, sport, education, youth, public works, social affairs...
 - Permanent actions, as it is very difficult to achieve these goals in short term, and to get immediate results. Physical activity shall be disassociated from aesthetics.
 - Strategic alliances with as many organisations as possible to ensure the success of programs application, especially at the local level.
 - Good practices for every social environment —which means: accessible for all, specific for every social network, gradually applicable, with the participation of the different actors —schools, working centres, hospitals, elderly centres, youth centres, health centres, different ethnic groups, sport networks...
 - Multidisciplinary application teams, who would not necessarily be health agents, as the most important is not to inform but to change lifestyles.
 - Specific processes to evaluate the impact of different programs to be able to amend and improve their content and application. University and research centres can be significant factors in these processes.
 - Adequate and sufficient means for scientific research at both public and private levels to propose programs according to evidences in every country in long-term results perspective.
6. The conference stated that working on the sport-health binomial shall constitute a permanent axis of the Sport Countries Network, on contributing to tackle the global challenge of declining physical activity and to achieve more active societies through local, regional and international agreements.

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