

Brian W. Martin · Sonja Kahlmeier · Francesca Racioppi · Finn Berggren ·
Mari Miettinen · Jean-Michel Oppert · Harry Rutter · Radim Šlachta ·
Mireille van Poppel · Jozica Maucec Zakotnik · Dirk Meusel · Pekka Oja ·
Michael Sjöström

Evidence-based physical activity promotion - HEPA Europe, the European Network for the Promotion of Health-Enhancing Physical Activity

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Abstract There has been a world-wide increase in scientific interest in health-enhancing physical activity (HEPA). The importance of a physically active lifestyle has now been well established both on the individual and on the population level. At the same time, physical inactivity has become a global problem. While sports for all has a long history, only a few examples of long-term integrated physical activity promotion strategies have been in place in Europe until recently, namely in Finland, the Netherlands and England. A number of countries have now begun to develop their own activities. However, there has been a

noticeable lack of a platform for sharing the development and implementation of evidence-based policies and strategies. In order to fill this gap, HEPA Europe, the European Network for the Promotion of Health-Enhancing Physical Activity, was founded in May 2005 in Gerlev, Denmark. The goal of the network is to strengthen and support efforts and actions that increase participation in physical activity and improve the conditions favourable to a healthy lifestyle, in particular with respect to HEPA. The Network is working closely with the WHO Regional Office for Europe (<http://www.euro.who.int/hepa>). The network fo-

Members of the Steering Committee of HEPA Europe (BWM, FR, FB, MM, JMO, HR, RS, MVP, JMZ).

Representatives of the European Commission Working Party on Lifestyle (DM, MS), and the European Commission Network Project Task Force on Public Health Nutrition and Physical Activity (JMO, HR, JMZ, DM, PO, MS).

B. W. Martin (✉)
Physical Activity and Health Branch, Swiss Federal Institute
of Sports Magglingen, Swiss Federal Office of Sports,
2532 Magglingen, Switzerland
e-mail: brian.martin@baspo.admin.ch
Tel.: +41-32-3276448
Fax: +41-32-3276404

S. Kahlmeier · F. Racioppi
WHO, European Centre for Environment and Health,
Rome Office,
Rome, Italy

F. Berggren
Gerlev PE and Sports Academy,
Gerlev, Denmark

M. Miettinen
Ministry of Social Affairs and Health,
Helsinki, Finland

J.-M. Oppert
University Pierre et Marie Curie-Paris 6,
Nutrition, Hotel Dieu,
Paris, France

H. Rutter
South East Public Health Group,
Oxford, UK

R. Šlachta
Faculty of Physical Culture,
Palacky University,
Olomouc, Czech Republic

M. van Poppel
VU University Medical Center,
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

J. M. Zakotnik
Countrywide Integrated
Noncommunicable Diseases
Intervention Programme (CINDI),
Ljubljana, Slovenia

D. Meusel
Dresden Technische Universität Dresden,
Research Association Public Health Saxony
and Saxony-Anhalt,
Dresden, Germany

P. Oja
UKK Institute,
Tampere, Finland

P. Oja · M. Sjöström
Karolinska Institute,
Stockholm, Sweden

cuses on population-based approaches for the promotion of HEPA, using the best-available scientific evidence, and is currently implementing its first projects. HEPA Europe has established collaboration with EU Commission projects and Agita Mundo. Priorities for future work have been defined, and interested organisations and institutions have the opportunity to join the network and participate in the process.

Keywords Physical activity · Public health · Prevention · Health promotion

Introduction

The importance of physical activity for health, or health-enhancing physical activity (HEPA), has been well established. Early important syntheses were “Moving On”, by the UK Health Education Authority (Killoran et al. 1994), and the US Surgeon General’s Report on Physical Activity and Health (CDC 1996), but extensive research has been conducted since that has contributed to the body of knowledge (Oja and Borms 2004). Physical inactivity has been identified as a leading risk factor in recent “world health reports” of the World Health Organization (WHO 2002, 2003).

While a standardised method for the population assessment of HEPA has only recently been introduced (Craig et al. 2003), the estimates available so far emphasise the public health relevance of the issue: 17% of the adult global population are estimated to be physically inactive, and another 41% are only insufficiently active for health benefits (WHO 2002). For the three European WHO subregions for which the “world health report” provides estimates, the proportion of inactive individuals ranges between 16% and 24%. WHO also estimates that, each year, physical inactivity causes 1.9 million premature deaths globally and some 600,000 in the European Region alone.

Sports-for-all promotion has a long history in many countries, but only a few examples of long-term integrated physical activity promotion strategies were in place until about 10 years ago, notably those in Finland (Vuori et al. 2004) and Canada (Edwards 2004). Since then, large national programs have been launched, first in England and the Netherlands, but later also in other countries (Foster 2000). During the same period, there has been a growth in research into the health effects of physical activity, and work has also begun to focus on assessing the effectiveness of interventions (Kahn et al. 2002; Oja and Borms 2004; Hillsdon et al. 2005; Cavill et al. *in press*).

The role of international structures and contacts

Early concepts already have defined that HEPA can take place in leisure time, at work or in domestic duties (Bouchard and Shephard 1994); more recent models also include physical activity for transport as a fourth domain

(WHO 2002). International organisations have been essential in promoting the concept of regular physical activity and the recommendation of at least half an hour of moderate-intensity activities a day (CDC 1996). WHO has played an important role, with the WHO Global Initiative for Active Living, the Move for Health Day and, most recently, its Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health (WHO 2004), along with other health organisations such as the World Heart Federation and the International Diabetes Federation. From 1996 until 2001, the first European Network for the Promotion of Health-Enhancing Physical Activity existed as a programme funded by the European Union (EU) and was instrumental in facilitating exchange and providing support for the development of integrated national approaches (Vuori 2005). The specific products of the network have been influential not only because of their content but also because of the process by which they were developed. For example, the inclusion of “Allez Hop!” in the analyses for the “Guidelines for Health-Enhancing Physical Activity Promotion Programmes” (Foster 2000) has had a political impact on the national scale in Switzerland and led to further support for the project. The European Network for the Promotion of Health-Enhancing Physical Activity was exclusively funded by the EU DG SANCO programme. Unfortunately, this support was no longer granted after 2001.

International activities in the field of environment and health have recently started to address transport-related physical activity also. The WHO Charter on Transport, Environment and Health (1999), adopted by the Third Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health, set a policy framework that acknowledges the role of transport-related physical activity in the attainment of better health. The document “Promotion of Transport Walking and Cycling in Europe: Strategy Directions” of the first European Network (Oja and Vuori 2000) has provided a valuable basis for further development, for example in the “Transnational Project Transport-Related Health Effects with a Particular Focus On Children” (Martin et al. 2004).

The number of congresses and publications covering physical activity and health has increased considerably over the last few years, and the possibilities for exchange about the scientific aspects of health effects of physical activity, about methodological issues and about the effectiveness of interventions have improved accordingly. However, after the end of the first European Network, there was no forum for regular exchange of information, nor was there an international platform supporting the development of national strategies for physical activity promotion. The nongovernmental organisation Agita Mundo provides these functions on the global level (Matsudo et al. 2004), but both practicality and cultural similarities favour a European structure. This is even more important now that many European countries are following the call of WHO’s Global Strategy (WHO 2004) to develop and implement their national strategies. At the same time, a growing wealth of experience and evidence exists but is often not available to health promotion practitioners in the field or in national administrations (Cavill et al. *in press*). Only a

small proportion of the evidence exists in the form of publications in scientific journals, and many documents are in the form of reports (Kroes et al. 2004; Thommen and Braun 2004) that are often only available in local languages. Some considerations for physical activity policy development exist (Shephard et al. 2004), but more work has to be done to provide concepts that can be applied in practice.

HEPA Europe

In this situation, the idea for a new European Physical Activity Promotion Network was developed during an international Physical Activity Expert Meeting in Magglingen, Switzerland, in June 2004. The Swiss Federal Offices of Sports and Public Health provided financial support for the first phase of the network, and the WHO European Centre for Environment and Health in Rome is working closely with it. An intermediate steering committee started working, and the founding meeting of HEPA Europe, the new European Network for the Promotion of Health-Enhancing Physical Activity, took place at the Gerlev Physical Education and Sports Academy in Denmark in May of 2005 (HEPA Europe 2005, see Fig. 1). A steering committee was established, and the cornerstones of the network were defined (see Table 1).

HEPA Europe will contribute to the development of the evidence base on both the health effects of physical activity and on the effectiveness of approaches to physical activity promotion. The network will work to make this evidence easily available and provide specific expertise to other



Fig. 1 The design element of HEPA Europe, the European Network for the Promotion of Health-Enhancing Physical Activity. The network was founded in May 2005, and interested organisations and institutions have the opportunity to join the network and participate in the process

partners in order to contribute to the development and implementation of national policies and strategies for HEPA in Europe. It wants to develop, support and disseminate effective strategies, programmes, approaches and other examples of good practice. It does so by organising annual network meetings for its members and by maintaining a Web site at www.euro.who.int/hepa; conferences for a wider circle of participants are a possible future development. HEPA Europe supports and facilitates the development of multisectoral approaches to physical activity promotion, and the members of the network serve as experts to a whole range of organisations and projects, including WHO Headquarters, WHO Europe's 2006 Ministerial Conference on Counteracting Obesity, the Pan-European Programme on Transport, Environment and Health (THE PEP) and the EU Platform on Diet, Physical Activity and Health.

The role of physical activity in the prevention of overweight and obesity is a very important one, and the WHO Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health (WHO 2004) states: "Diet and physical activity influence health both together and separately. Although the effects of diet and physical activity on health often interact, particularly in relation to obesity, there are additional health benefits to be gained from physical activity that are independent of nutrition and diet, and there are significant nutritional risks that are unrelated to obesity. Physical activity is a fundamental means of improving the physical and mental health of individuals." From the public health perspective, the main disease burden comes from cardiovascular diseases, overweight and obesity and other metabolic diseases such as type 2 diabetes, several types of cancer and osteoporosis. Because physical activity can substantially reduce the risk of all these diseases, HEPA Europe does not limit its scope to any single health effect of physical activity promotion.

Collaboration with the European Union and global partnerships

Physical activity is addressed, together with nutrition, in the Community Public Health Programme, 2003–2008, of the EU. The recent launch of the EU Platform on Diet, Physical Activity and Health by the Directorate General for Health and Consumer Affairs DG SANCO is part of the overall strategy on nutrition and physical activity being developed by the EU Commission and follows discussions with various stakeholders about ways to address the obesity epidemic in Europe. Within the programme, the commission finances projects aimed at collecting data on obesity, nutrition and physical activity (as part of the Health Information Strand), as well as projects aimed at promoting healthy diets and physical activity (as part of the Health Determinant Strand).

A very close relationship covering virtually all projects of HEPA Europe has been established with one of these projects, the "European Network on Public Health Nutrition and Physical Activity" and its task forces on Physical

Table 1 Cornerstones of HEPA Europe as defined at the first network meeting in Gerlev, Denmark (2005)

Vision	To achieve better health through physical activity among all people in Europe
Goal	To strengthen and support efforts and actions that increase participation and improve the conditions favourable to a healthy lifestyle, in particular with respect to Health-Enhancing Physical Activity (HEPA)
Objectives	To contribute to the development and implementation of policies and strategies for HEPA in Europe To develop, support, and disseminate effective strategies, programs, approaches, and other examples of good practice to promote HEPA; and To support and facilitate the development of multisectoral approaches to the promotion of HEPA
Guiding principles	All activities are based on relevant policy statements, such as the WHO Global Strategy for Diet, Physical Activity and Health, and on corresponding policy statements from the European Commission. The network focuses on population-based approaches for the promotion of health-enhancing physical activity using the best available scientific evidence. The network emphasises the importance of monitoring and evaluation; it encourages the development of standardised measurement methods and systematic research. The ongoing exchange, dissemination and sharing of experience and knowledge is encouraged. Membership is open to organisations and institutions at the subnational, national or international level willing to contribute to the goals and objectives of the network. Network activities support cooperation, partnerships and collaboration with other related sectors, networks, and approaches.

Activity and Monitoring. In addition, HEPA Europe is collaborating with the Lifestyle Working Party Secretariat, which organised the meeting on Monitoring of Physical Activity in September 2005 in Cyprus. More possibilities for joint projects are being actively explored.

On the global level, HEPA Europe has joined Agita Mundo (Matsudo et al. 2004) and is also cooperating with the Global Alliance on Physical Activity (GAPA), which is currently emerging from a cooperative agreement of the International Union for Health Promotion and Education (IUHPE) with the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (US CDC) (IUHPE 2005). This alliance is coordinated from the School of Sport & Exercise Sciences at Loughborough University, UK; it is global in scope and wants to coordinate and provide strategic orientation to the activities and actions developed by nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) as well as civil society.

Current projects and activities

The direct use for the practice of physical activity promotion and intersectoral approaches are priorities of HEPA Europe. The first project of the network is a collection of case studies of collaboration between the

physical activity promotion sector and the transport sector, which is carried out by the University of Basel, Switzerland (Thommen and Braun 2004) and funded by the Swiss Federal Offices of Sports and Public Health. The second project is a critical review paper of health effects related to physical activity in cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness analyses of investments in transport infrastructures and policies. The work is carried out at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, Sweden, and funded through resources made available to the WHO European Centre for Environment and Health by the Swedish Government.

A number of further projects have been defined in the work programme 2005–2006 (see Table 2). Interested organisations have the opportunity to join HEPA Europe, to contribute their knowledge and expertise, to benefit from experiences that have already been made and to participate in the process of this new pan-European platform at the interface between science and policymaking.

Better health through physical activity is the vision of the European Network for the Promotion of Health-Enhancing Physical Activity. The public health importance of healthy lifestyles and conditions favourable to physical activity is only beginning to emerge, and together with its partners,

Table 2 Projects and products from the HEPA Europe work programme 2005–2006

Collection of case studies for collaboration between the physical activity promotion and the transport sector
Review on cost-benefit analysis methodology with regard to walking and cycling
Advocacy booklet on the key facts and figures on physical activity for policymakers
Inventory of existing approaches, policy documents, and targets related to physical activity promotion in countries in the WHO European Region
Review of examples of national physical activity promotion networks, including interministerial and intersectoral approaches
Overview of ongoing international and European activities and networks relevant to HEPA Europe
General framework for physical activity promotion policy.
Guidelines for the development of national HEPA promotion programmes for policymakers
Discussion paper on currently used recommendations for health-enhancing physical activity

HEPA Europe wants to provide the framework and the substance to address these issues.

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