ICARA – a global forum for research associations

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In 2008, Griffith Edwards and Thomas Babor (Edwards & Babor 2008, 9–12), published their closing remarks to a series in the journal Addiction which had presented alcohol and drug research societies from different parts of the world. Against the backdrop of the very diverse stories of these associations, the authors argued for formalised, global co-operation between the thirty something associations they had identified. In such co-operation, they said, societies could share experiences on practical matters as well as questions of principle, support research societies in developing countries and strengthen all associations’ reflection over their future societal roles.

Last year, a group of persons from different research associations from around the world and major research funding bodies, together with the World Health Organization, met and decided that the establishment of a global group in the spirit of Edwards’ and Babor’s suggestion was a worthy cause and a realistic project. In Lisbon in September this year, the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) hosted a meeting which can be considered the founding meeting of the International Confederation of Alcohol, Tobacco, other Drugs and Behavioral Addictions Research Association (ICARA).

The meeting was sponsored by the National Institute for Health and Welfare, Finland; IOGT-NTO-International in Sweden; and the Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues in Finland. Sixteen different research associations from Europe, Africa, South and North America, and Australia attended the meeting. These associations were national, regional and international, some with fewer than 100 members, and others with several thousand individual members. Alcohol, tobacco and illegal drug research were all represented. Support had been declared from a further group of associations, including one from Asia. The US National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO), and EMCDDA represented major governmental or inter-governmental bodies at the meeting.

During the Lisbon meeting the representatives discussed the membership and mission statement of ICARA. It was agreed that ICARA shall be a confederation for societies with personal membership and where research on alcohol, tobacco, other drugs, gambling or other behavioural addictions is a core activity. The association shall focus on information exchange and
mutual support, especially with regard to practical matters for research associations, such as organising conferences, establishing and owning journals. Another task would be to develop and disseminate information and educational material about funding opportunities, ethical questions for research and new developments in evidence-based policies. ICARA will support the use of evidence in policy, but will not take a stand on individual policy measures. National and international advocacy for research funding is a third important issue. ICARA will also provide opportunities for inter-organisational research collaboration and for the mentoring of new societies and their leaders.

The main part of the meeting was dedicated to sharing experiences on topics of common interest. One group of questions dealt with ‘The Successful Association’, with questions such as: What does it take to keep a research association going strong? What are the potential funding possibilities? How do you recruit – and keep – members? This discussion was also a good way of getting to know the different associations present. The second main topic concerned how research associations deal with industry presence and sponsorship of meetings and other activities. The tobacco research associations had a particularly valuable role in this discussion. The third topic probed how ICARA could support research and research associations in developing countries.

After increasingly enthusiastic debates during the two days, the representatives agreed on the formation of three working groups in preparation for next year’s meeting: one to finalise the by-laws, register the association in Finland, and prepare and handle the elections of the first board and next meeting, a second to set up a website and portal for the dissemination of information on research funding and training materials for researchers, and a third to collect and analyse guidelines and experiences of industry sponsorship and to develop model guidelines for associations on these matters.

While some associations have a very stable structure, many others circulate their leadership quite often. Some research societies are not very public. They may, for instance, primarily serve their members’ interests in communicating on a national level. This means that ICARA will be able to identify many more than the thirty associations singled out by Edwards and Babor, but also that ICARA can truly give new opportunities for self-reflection and to develop the work of associations. For ICARA, the stimulating prospects of real co-operation between researchers from the alcohol, tobacco, illegal drugs, gambling and other behavioural addictions field is an exciting task.

REFERENCE