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The Prevention Project Dunkelfeld (PPD) – Proactive Strategies to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse and Child Pornography Offences

**Mr Klaus M. Beier, Director of the Institute of Sexology and Sexual Medicine,
Charité-University of Medicine of Berlin (Germany)**

Summary

The presentation describes the German prevention approach, which aims at improving proactive strategies to protect children from sexual exploitation through online offenses, such as the consumption or distribution of child abusive images (so-called child pornography) as well as hands-on contact child sexual abuse. Official statistics account for only a fraction of all child sexual abuse (CSA) and the use of child abusive images (so called “child pornography offenses” – CPO). Those cases not reported to the authorities constitute the largest part of sexual offenses against children and are in German referred to as “Dunkelfeld” (literally “dark field”). Consequently, preventive efforts must consider both primary prevention in the case of potential offenders as well as secondary prevention for self-referred offenders in the Dunkelfeld. Concerning sexual offenses against children, two groups can be distinguished: On the one hand those showing no sexual preference disorder, but who, for different reasons, sexually abuse children; and on the other hand those showing a sexual preference disorder, namely paedophilia (i.e. the erotic preference for prepubescent minors) and/or hebephilia (i.e. the erotic preference for pubescent minors).

Sexual preference in general manifests itself during adolescence and remains unchanged thereafter. This is true for paedophilia and hebephilia, as well. Thus, paedophiles and hebephiles will always be at risk of offending and/or re-offending, mainly in the Dunkelfeld. Furthermore, empiric data suggests that paedophiles and hebephiles reveal high levels of co-morbidity and distress because of the problems associated with their sexual preference and that they, as a result, are more likely than other sexual offenders to seek treatment. However, community-based specialized diagnostic and therapeutic programs for these self-referred individuals remain scarce. For that reason the Institute of Sexology and Sexual Medicine in Berlin developed a prevention approach by generating a media campaign to encourage self-identified (but officially not registered) paedophiles and hebephiles to seek professional help to avoid committing CSA and CPO.

After the launch of the mentioned media campaign in June 2005, which informed about the opportunity to receive help, on average 15–20 individuals per month contacted the research office in Berlin. Accordingly, from the beginning up to September 2013, there were 1884 applications, 779 assessments and treatment offers to 399 individuals. The decrease is mainly due to geographic distances – the applicants came from all over Germany and were not all able to attend treatment sessions on a weekly basis. As expected, the vast majority were either paedophiles or hebephiles. Half of them had already committed child sexual abuse and three quarters admitted to child pornography offenses in the Dunkelfeld.

In a specialized one-year treatment program the participants learn to ensure impulse control by using cognitive-behavioural techniques, sexological tools (integrating the attachment dimension in terms of an increase of social functioning), as well as pharmaceutical options (mostly androgene deprivation therapy). The evaluation of the PPD was done in a non-randomized waiting list–control design with multiple assessments for 75 participants. It revealed that the primary prevention approach:

- reduces risk factors for child sexual abuse;
- prevents sexual offending against minors and reduces the number of contact offenses;
- and reduces frequency and severity of child pornography offenses.

Currently the Primary Prevention Project Dunkelfeld is being expanded. In addition to the one in Berlin, 7 further contact points in other German States have been successfully established and two more at least will follow within the next year. It will be argued that eventually, there are aims of expanding on an international basis, because paedophilia and hebephilia represent a part of human sexuality and can therefore be found in any culture and in any country. Subsequently, in every country a huge Dunkelfeld can be assumed, too. Furthermore, particularly the use of child abusive images is a topic of international concern. Despite the fact that the legislation in Germany regarding the non-mandatory reporting practice concerning CSA and CPO is crucial for the success of this preventive program (according to German law, it is considered a breach of confidentiality for the treating therapist to report either committed or planned CSA or CPO) the current situation in other countries – even those with mandatory report laws - would allow at least to focus on potential or real users of child abusive images in the Dunkelfeld for preventive purposes.

The use of child abusive images is an indicator for a paedophilic and/or hephilic inclination and therefore the user is an important target for prevention. The PPD shows that it is possible to reach paedophiles/hebephiles from the community and to encourage these men to change their habit of using child abusive images. Furthermore it indicates the probability of preventing crossover to hands-on child sexual abuse – which would be a promising primary prevention approach for this cause. But, of course, it will only work, if trust is achieved and confidentiality guaranteed.

Literature

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Useful links:

www.dont-offend.org

<https://www.kein-taeter-werden.de/>

www.sexualmedizin-charite.de