# Healthy Workplaces Good Practice Awards 2018-2019

# CASE STUDY

## Detoxikon — minimising harm to public order and safety personnel from microdoses of illegal narcotics

AWARDED

| ORGANISATION/COMPANY | COUNTRY | SECTOR | TASKS |
|---|---|---|---|
| VAKOS XT, a.s. & Service Facility for the Ministry of the Interior | Czechia | Public sector, public order and safety services (e.g. police, fire and ambulance services, customs authorities, intelligence services) | Narcotics operations, handling of samples and evidence, analysis of samples |

*Source: VAKOS XT, a.s.*

## Background

Illegal methamphetamine production is an issue in Czechia. Public order and safety personnel — such as those of the national police, fire and rescue service, customs authorities, intelligence services, and municipal police and ambulance services — are at risk of being exposed accidentally to such psychoactive substances through their work.

Exposure at even very low levels (‘microdoses’) to aerosols or through skin contact with contaminated surfaces can lead to skin irritation, respiratory problems and headaches, and affect cognitive processing and autonomic nervous system functioning. Despite these ill effects, standard operating procedures for personnel that may come into contact with narcotics were not fit for purpose or were missing altogether, there is a lack of awareness of the risks and how to identify hazards, and suitable protective equipment or clothing is often not used.

The Detoxikon project, resulting from a long-term collaboration between VAKOS XT, a.s., CBRN (Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear) Division, and the Department of Specialised Methods, Service Facility for the Ministry of the Interior, addresses these shortfalls.

## Aims

The project aimed to minimise the exposure of some public order and safety service workers to hazardous psychoactive substances, by facilitating the implementation of collective and individual preventive and protective measures and to reduce the observed effects in already exposed workers.

## What was done and how?

The project is split into three parts:

1. **Decontamination of workplaces and vehicles**: this includes gradual adjustments to everyday standard operating procedures, and training personnel in how to implement them.
2. **Training**: raising awareness among staff that microdoses of psychoactive substances can cause clinical symptoms and what the effects on human health are, of how psychoactive substance contamination can spread and the range of spread, and of how to identify and prevent risks, particularly through the use of appropriate personal protective equipment and clothing. A range of audio-visual materials, info sheets and practical training exercises is used. Because of the nature of the operations carried out by personnel at risk of exposure to microdoses of narcotics, collective measures may be difficult to implement at some sites and therefore personal protective measures are essential. The hands-on training programme raises awareness of the risks and promotes good safety and health practices for the handling of evidence, the care of service vehicles and clothing, and procedures carried out before, during and after narcotics operations. There is a particular emphasis on improving the level of individual protection and training personnel in the appropriate use of personal protective equipment through practical examples, creating training laboratories and professional consulting.
3. **Specific therapy**: this combines techniques aimed at detoxifying the human body, promoting physical fitness and helping individuals to cope with stress. Trials are under way of a specific therapy aimed at enabling individuals to better handle the effects of exposure to microdoses of psychoactive substances. The therapy involves neuro- and audio-visual stimulation and a tailored nutrition plan. Affected individuals and their families are also offered psychosocial support.

*Source: VAKOS XT, a.s.*

Detoxikon also focuses on data collection and dissemination among the scientific community, and the practical application of the most up-to-date scientific knowledge.

## What was achieved?

More than 1,000 personnel, mainly from drug enforcement units, forensic services, and investigation departments of the customs authorities and mobile supervision units, both in Czechia and other countries, received training from 2014 to 2018.

The procedures for workplace decontamination led to a reduction in long-term damage to health.

Exposed workers showed a decrease in symptomatic indications of intoxication such as non-specific headache, gastrointestinal tract complications, muscle spasms and cramps, lack of concentration and mental imbalance, as well as an increase in the ability to handle work tasks and stress.

Specifically, there were measurable improvements — based on cognitive and cardiovascular system functioning and heart rate assessments — in the following areas:

- cognitive process stability
- ability to concentrate
- autonomic nervous system functioning
- body stress, measured by overall muscle tone and tension/subcutaneous structure spasms
- psychological stress resistance and ability to resist the influence of stress factors.

*Source: VAKOS XT, a.s.*

## Success factors

The project is strongly supported by the Ministry of the Interior and other public safety authorities, and involves collaboration with the Czech Labour Safety Research Institute.

## Transferability

The intervention could be transferred to other Member States and to other areas of work in which staff are at risk of exposure to psychoactive drugs, for instance healthcare workers, or workers who handle and transport such substances.

***'The intervention is innovative and addresses an increasing risk in a sector that needs attention.'***

## Costs and benefits

The non-specific symptoms associated with chronic exposure to microdoses of psychoactive substances — such as headache, inability to concentrate on the fulfilment of tasks, and changes in emotional and mental state related to dealing with workload and stress — are known to significantly reduce individuals' quality of life and ability to work. Reducing the incidence of these problems among staff involved in narcotics operations not only will benefit the individuals affected, but is likely to reduce absence from work and increase productivity, resulting in significant savings for employers and health and social care services.

The costs of developing and implementing Detoxikon were met by the individual services and the Ministry of Industry and Trade.

The processes implemented and the approach taken to educate personnel in identifying and eliminating risks contributes to improvements in occupational safety and health across the public health and safety authorities. It also reduces the risks to people living or working near narcotics operations.

## Key features of good practice example

- The project makes a relevant contribution to improving the working conditions of workers potentially exposed to psychoactive drugs.
- The intervention is innovative and sustainable.
- The measures have been successfully implemented in practice.
- The intervention goes beyond the minimum national legislative requirements and addresses a public sector that needs more attention.
- Project implementation has the clear commitment of management.
- The project results in real, demonstrable improvements and adds value to existing safety and health practices for narcotics operations.

## Further information

Further information can be found at www.vakosxt.cz