

Re-inventing the (square) wheel

Athlete or not, sport needs your help to get real about drugs

DRUG WORKERS ARE seeing and will continue to see more steroid users. Most are not in competitive sport but the social and policy environment in which they take drugs is heavily influenced by the sporting world. This makes it important to be aware how policy relating to drugs in sport is developing. Unfortunately, 'developing' somewhat overstates the position. Although policy on drugs in sport does have a trajectory, its original knee-jerk momentum towards prohibition and punitive action has merely tended to gather pace rather than evolve through serious debate and reflection.

Today's anti-doping buzzword is 'harmonisation' – of banned substances, surveillance, testing and penalties, across nations and international bodies and every sport. Harmonisation, it's felt, would help ward off challenges through the courts, which tend to question testing procedures and the right of a sporting body to effectively stop someone working. In this way it is thought harmonisation would help defeat drugs in sport.

Harm reduction equals abstinence

What sporting authorities want everyone to fall in line with is their view that prohibition and punishment are the desired and only ethical ways forward in the sporting war against drugs: 'desired' because drug use is thought detrimental to the sporting ideal; 'ethical' because drug use (especially of anabolic steroids) is seen as dangerous. (As in the non-sporting world, however, these risks are often exaggerated.)

By now it will be clear to many readers that sports leaders are re-inventing the square wheel which most of us jettisoned years ago. They appear unaware of the evolution of drug policy and practice in the non-sporting world. Typically they believe drug supply and demand can be halted just by getting tough and then tougher still, while their ideas about drug education barely go beyond scare stories. They don't recognise that in the wider drugs world, relying exclusively on such strategies is now seen as unworkable and mistaken.

For them there is only one form of harm reduction, abstinence; in King Canute style, they believe they can enforce it. Whatever they say, many of the millions who use steroids in sport will continue to do so; for those determined to use performance-enhancing drugs, the best we can hope for is to steer them to safer practices. A policy which fails to take that reality into account is not seriously or pragmatically addressing the health needs of the people it purports to protect.

Sporting authorities urgently need to engage in a broader debate on drug use and learn from experience. In a word, they

need help. Help to see that the sporting world, harmonised or not, will never have the resources of governments – and these have failed to reduce drug trafficking or stop demand growing for the traffickers' products. Even harnessing state power through laws banning performance-enhancing drugs (as in the USA and suggested by the British government¹) does not seem to reduce their use. Supply routes may be disrupted, but are often simply replaced.

In America, outlawing these drugs, once reliably provided by other athletes, coaches or gym owners, has opened the way for 'street dealers',² and for the adulteration and fakes common in the wider illicit market. Already this is happening here as steroids move to quasi-illegal status. Accessing users of these drugs is problematic for drug agencies while social disapproval distances them from normal sources of advice, such as GPs. Criminalisation would make this worse. Neither is there any evidence that 'getting tough' will reduce demand in the face of the increasing commercialisation of sport and the rewards of success.³ Harmonisation may help paper over some cracks, but it will not solve the problem.

Inappropriate policy lead

The sporting world has made the policy-running over performance-enhancing drugs and set the tenor of the public debate. To date, this has resulted in far too narrow a perspective. Beyond sport, a growing body of users of steroids and related drugs is concerned less with sporting performance than with muscular looks. All this would matter less if sport was coming up with policies that were in the interests of non-sporting users of steroids and related drugs and those outside sport who seek to help and educate them. This is not the case.

Until sport's get tough approach is tempered by the experience and pragmatism of the approach to drug problems in the non-sporting world, drug agencies will continue to pick up the casualties. We should inform sports administrators how drug agencies work to reduce harm and minimise risks. We should encourage debate on non-abstinence based policy by providing insights into how it could be done differently.

Initially, this can be done by giving the issue more prominence in *our* work. We can bring it to the attention of local government and other appropriate bodies. We can give it more prominence in our literature. We can bring these issues to the attention of sports publications and get involved in their debates. Unless we start to impact on *them*, policy which impacts on drug agencies will be unduly influenced by those more insular in their outlook and less informed in their practice. ○

They believe they can enforce abstinence

1. "ACMD recommends new controls on steroids." *Druglink*: 1993, 8(5), p.4.

2. Yesalis C. E. "Incidence of anabolic steroid use: a discussion of methodological issues." In Yesalis C. E. ed. *Anabolic steroids in sport and exercise*. Human Kinetics: Leeds, 1993.

3. See Coomber R. "Drugs in sport: rhetoric or pragmatism." *International Journal on Drug Policy*: 1993, 4(4), p. 169-178.

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