

# **DRUG USE IN AUSTRALIAN SPORT: IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICY**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The dangers of drug use in sport are well-established, accentuated periodically by tragedies of both high profile and lesser known athletes (Ingram 2004). Less well established are the values, beliefs and motivations of sport participants who employ drugs for performance advantage or recreation (Donovan et al. 2002). Yet, an understanding of athlete beliefs and attitudes are central to the development of effective drugs-in-sport policy (BMA 2002). This paper seeks to explore the factors and influences that shape athlete views on the drugs-in-sport problem, and reveal how they go about deciding whether or not to use drugs. In short, we aim to compile a morphology of drug use in Australian sport.

We aim to show that while many useful models and theories that illuminate drug use in sport have been constructed, they are limited by their focus on the socio-legal costs and benefits of using drugs. We believe that the investigation needs to be broadened to take into account a diagnosis of the values, beliefs and assumptions that underpin athlete perceptions of drug use in sport. The aim here is to develop a morphology of drug use in sport that combines the micro-orientation on individual athlete behavior with the macro-orientation on sporting culture and context. Such a holistic diagnosis requires an interpretive view of the situational factors that mitigate easy explanations of drug-taking behavior.

## **METHODS**

Our argument for a holistic approach to the drugs-in-sport problem is founded upon three premises. First, there are many influences on decisions made about sport and drug use. Second, decisions made by athletes are not necessarily rational or explainable by a simple cost-benefit calculus. Third, a full explanation of drug use or avoidance by athletes requires the development of models that account for contextual variables that affect decision-making.

## **RESULTS**

In the light of the complex web of relationships and ideologies that comprises the drugs-in-sport context, it is not surprising that policies and strategies that punish and demonise athletes for taking drugs have not been successful in eliminating drugs from sport. We propose a harm reduction policy that allows athletes to manage their usage in a safe and secure environment. While a harm reduction policy is controversial, it accepts that drugs will always be part of the sporting landscape, and concedes that the playing field will not always be level. We also believe it is socially responsible since it aims to minimise the harm associated with chronic drug use.

## **DISCUSSION**

The drugs-in-sport problem is real. There are many models and theories that aim to help us understand the complexities of the problem, and how it can be best managed. However, as we suggested in this paper, the focus has been sometimes narrow, and confined to an analysis of athletes as rational decision makers unaffected by their commercial, cultural and social context. We do not at the moment have the perfect answer or policy solution to the problem. However, we believe that there has been insufficient research that considers the contextual factors that impact on athlete beliefs and decision-making, and how these factors can be managed to make drug taking less attractive and less harmful to athletes.

In view of the above discussion we also believe that consideration be given to some form of harm reduction policy that focuses more on the health problem and less on the level-playing-field problem. This is fundamentally unpopular in the sports-world, since it undermines the ethos and mythology of sport, which says that everyone has an equal chance to succeed. On the other hand, it is also consistent with the reality of elite, commercial sport, where athletes are always finding ways of securing that elusive competitive edge.

## **REFERENCES**

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