

# Developing Disability Sport: Pathways from Participation to Excellence

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## Managing Para-Athletes' Experience and Engagement with Sport Medicine in Large Scale Sport Event

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### **Aim**

The aim of this research is to examine the experience of para-sport athletes and their encounters with medical professionals during Gold Coast 2018 Commonwealth Games. Understanding how para-sport athletes experience medical/rehabilitation encounters in the context of elite competition will contribute to the paucity of knowledge regarding the nexus of high performance sport and para-athletes and can inform event management practices around sport medicine/physiotherapy models of care.

### **Literature Review**

Athletes have expressed dissatisfaction with orthodox medical and rehabilitation practices, due in part to perceived disinterest, over prescription of drugs, and the disempowering nature of the medical encounter (Malcolm & Safai, 2012). Athletes and people living with impairment are 'actively dependent' on the disciplinary practices of medical professionals; to optimize health, manage illness, and in the case of athletes, prevent injury and maximize performance (Lupton, 2012). Medical and rehabilitative practices privilege non-disabled bodies at the peril of the para-sport athlete. Medicalized biases regarding impaired sporting bodies may prevent medical/rehabilitation practitioners from becoming involved with para-sport athletes and contribute to athlete reluctance in seeking sport medicine and sport therapy care during and outside of competition.

The Commonwealth Games is a multi-sport Games attended by nations from the Commonwealth of Nations. In 1994, athletes with impairment participated in demonstration events and in 2002, para-sport athletes were granted full athlete status. Given the integrated nature of a Commonwealth Games, where elite athletes with and without impairment 'eat, sleep, and compete' simultaneously, Gold Coast 2018 afforded a unique opportunity to critique the planning, delivery and experience of medical services of para-sport athletes. Contextual Background: The first author is a sport physiotherapist and veteran of multiple Paralympic Games. Longstanding membership in both the Canadian Paralympic and sport medicine communities afforded her an 'insider' perspective to examine medical encounters of the para-athlete during elite competition (Howe, 2008). An ethnographic approach to data collection was used. Methods included interviews and observations of athletes with impairment (Spradley, 2016).

### **Methodology**

Ethnographic field research was conducted at the Gold Coast 2018 Commonwealth Games. Ethnographic encounters included liaising with Health Science Teams (HST) and Team

Leaders (TL) from multiple National Sport Organizations (NSO) to recruit para-sport athlete participants from diverse nations. Athletes who volunteered to participate were interviewed at a convenient time/location and asked questions regarding encounters with medical personnel during the Games, as athlete and as a person with impairment. Participants were asked to consider how medical services could be improved to support high performance and the experience of elite competition. Participants were observed during competition and social interaction in the Athlete Village. Field notes and critical reflections were maintained to inform data collection and analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

At the time of submission, data collection has been completed with analysis in the early stages. A mixed method approach to analysis is ongoing. Repeated and sustained immersion with the data resulted in a rich and intimate understanding of the data, which informed qualitative interpretation and supports rigor. Qualitative thematic analysis will be conducted to discover dominant/recurrent themes with a focus on how Games infrastructure, policies, and culture contributed positively and/or negatively to athlete experience of the Games and encounters with medical personnel. Analysis was conducted until elastic saturation was reached and the research question was adequately addressed.

### **Results**

Preliminary findings suggest athletes experience greater satisfaction with medical encounters during Games, due to increased engagement of medical personnel and focus on athleticism. Given the paucity of research surrounding the experience of para-sport athletes, the findings will contribute to the lacuna of sport science regarding high performance and athletes with impairment and provide insight into the perpetuation of the medicalized understanding of impaired body and ability. Knowledge of medical encounters from the perspective of the para-athlete will contribute to critical discussions of Games related practices, policies, attitudes and built environments that can impact para-athlete engagement in the high performance environment. Understanding the needs of the elite para-sport athlete inside and outside of competition will inform major Games preparation and management, and contribute to athlete health, prevent injury and maximize performance.

### **Conclusions**

Critical examination of the para- athlete experience regarding medical encounters during Gold Coast 2018 will generate knowledge regarding medical/rehabilitative needs of these athletes and inform future planning and delivery of high performance sport medicine. As the only integrated multi-sport Games, Commonwealth Games aims to “unite the Commonwealth family through sport”. Foregrounding the para-sport athlete experience during a Games will assist the Commonwealth Games Federation to plan and managed a more equitable Games.

### **References**

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