

ATHLETES' AND COACHES' ATTITUDES TOWARDS DRUGS IN SPORT

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Abstract

Literature review

Until very recently, research on doping in sport was confined to biological studies aimed at detecting drug use. The potential role of research into the attitudes of potential users was largely ignored (World Anti-Doping Agency, 2003) and has only recently begun to be explored. The noted lack of athlete participation in international anti-doping policy development is not unusual. Some would suggest it reflects a lack of athlete participation in decision-making processes affecting their lives more generally. Anti-doping policy researcher Barrie Houlihan (2004) summarizes the literature on international world-class anti-doping policy when he writes that "anti-doping policy is generally made for, or on behalf of, athletes, rarely in consultation with athletes, and almost never in partnership with athletes" (pp. 421-422).

One of the first steps in engaging athletes in the decision making process on drug policy is to understand their attitudes towards the control of drugs in sport. The attitudes that athletes have towards the use of performance enhancing and recreation drugs are also shaped by the attitudes of those who are key in their lives, in particular coaches. For example, research via questionnaire from the University College of Dublin suggests that athletes who said their coaches frequently criticized them, punished them for mistakes, encouraged rivalries and gave unequal recognition to teammates had the most favourable attitudes towards doping (Aldhous, 2008). It is clear then that investigating the attitudes of athletes and coaches towards doping in sport can provide valuable information that may help shape future anti-doping policy and play a pivotal role in deterring such behaviours.

This project involves the investigation of interactions between athletes and coaches in coming to understand these attitudes and how these attitudes might be shaped by biography of circumstances that athletes and coaches experience in their quest for sporting success. Such a project required a broad data-collection and analysis process to:

- Examine athletes' and coaches' attitudes toward doping

in sport.

- Determine the factors that athletes considering in relation to decisions about doping in sport.
- Determine the athletes' and coaches' expectations of suitable responses of government and sporting organisations to anti-doping.

Methodology

The research comprised two main parts: a quantitative phase, involving a survey of athletes and coaches, and a qualitative phase, involving focus group discussion with athletes and coaches.

Quantitative data were collected via an online survey and direct recruitment at sporting venues (athletes and coaches). The survey covered topics such as: perceived incidence of drug use; identification of sports where drug use is common; deterrents and punishments; and expectations of suitable responses of government and sporting organisations to anti-doping issues. Athletes and coaches also completed a short knowledge test. A total of 626 athletes and coaches from Queensland Australia participated in this phase of the research.

Qualitative data were collected via focus group interviews with a subsample of athletes and coaches who had participated in the quantitative phase. A total of 48 athletes and coaches participated in this phase of the research.

Results

The results of the research clearly show that athletes and coaches believe that the use of performance-enhancing and recreational drugs is extensive and a serious problem for sport. However, somewhat paradoxically, current anti-doping controls are seen as effective in deterring such conduct. Respondents generally expressed more negative attitudes towards performance-enhancing drugs than recreational drugs. In addition, sports where performance enhancing drug use was perceived to be common (mainly individual sports such as athletics) were different from those where recreational drug use was perceived as common (mainly team sports such as rugby).

Although athletes saw banned drug use as highly prevalent, within their own sports such drug use was seen to be relatively rare. Athletes/coaches were harsh in their attitudes towards the punishments for banned drug use, with the majority supporting both fines and bans. Nearly half of the athletes and coaches agreed with a statement that the use of PEDs should be criminalised; with only a quarter disagreeing.

Implications/Conclusions

The athletes and coaches in the current study generally estimated that drug use was lower in their own sport than other sports combined (with some exceptions), suggesting that the doping problem in sport tends to be perceived as 'somebody else's problem'. This suggests that anti-doping campaigns may need to tailor their campaigns to specific sports, rather than generic campaigns aimed at 'all sports'. Further, differences in perceived differential use of performance enhancing and recreational drugs in individual-based and team-based sports respectively, suggests that anti-doping education should be tailored to match particular types of drugs with particular sports.

References:

Houlihan, B. (2004). Civil Rights, Doping Control and the World Anti-Doping Code. *Sport and Society*, 7(3), 420-437.

World Anti-Doping Agency (2003). *World Conference on Doping in Sport: Summary*

Notes – Plenary Sessions. Retrieved November 11, 2004, from <http://www.wada-ama.org/rtecontent/document/plenary.pdf>