

THE CONVERSATION



Seven steps to reboot the fight against doping in sport

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Using our heads. New ways to battle doping in Olympic year. Duncan Rawlinson/Flickr, CC BY-NC

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The disqualification of Russia from the Rio Olympics appears to be a triumph for anti-doping. The World Anti-Doping Agency's independent commission produced enough evidence to justify support for a ban from the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Association of Athletics Federations. We might yet see other sports organisations imposing sanctions on athletes.

However, there is another side to anti-doping's apparent success. It is unlikely that we are close to catching the real number of dopers, and there remain calls for **more investigations**. So amid all the grandstanding, its effectiveness has been **called into question**, alongside its politics. After all, the IOC was a close partner in WADA's formation and provides half its funding. WADA's first president and current president have held prominent positions in the IOC, and there is a **close-knit culture across leading organisations**.

At the same time, decisions made about **relatively minor cases** have prompted controversy due to both unnecessarily harsh outcomes and **inconsistent sanctions**. It feels like a crucial moment, and a good one to propose some practical steps which can improve the current approach.



Should the architecture of anti-doping be rethought? Gordon Ross/Flickr, CC BY

1. More effective use of resources

Current policy involves regular testing of all elite athletes for a wide range of drugs. Were this approach to be rationalised, resources could be freed up to tackle the more significant problem of organised systematic doping in some countries.

One idea would be to give up testing for recreational, non-performance enhancing drugs. Another might be to define the drugs that are most likely to be used in each sport and test only for those. It might also be the case that some sports and countries simply run fewer tests if it can be established that the levels of doping risk are low.

Current policy assumes blanket testing to be the best deterrent. That might be so, but in order to catch the bigger fish, we might just have to let a few smaller ones go.

2. Engage with new people

Controlling drugs in sport needs international cooperation. Inspiration could come from progress on something like vaccination policies that have led to significant changes in immunisation on a global scale. We might invite advice from non-sports experts and researchers from business, health research or policy areas that have shown successful cooperation.

There are models that move away from an absolutist “war on drugs” approach, but which are still effective. Take the idea of “complex systems” which encourages a more flexible understanding of rules and targets by people directly involved and who can better understand and adapt to rapidly-changing circumstances at local level.

3. Support for whistleblowers

Those who come forward with inside information need to know they will be taken seriously and protected. This requires an independent body that protects their identity and makes sure evidence is taken seriously. There needs to be financial support to encourage whistleblowing, which can help inform more efficient and effective investigations. Recent failures to follow up on information, engage with people who try to help, and reduce personal risk, has shown this to be a major issue.



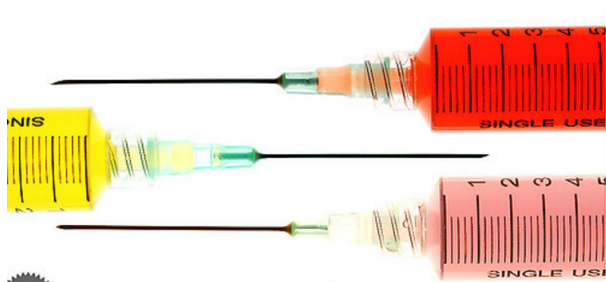
Protection for the brave. Steven Depolo/Flickr, CC BY

4. Evaluation of WADA

The paradox of setting up WADA as an independent agency is a lack of certainty regarding accountability and performance measures. There should be criteria by which success and failure are judged, transparency of decision-making, and regular review of policy implementation processes. Since governments provide **half of WADA's funding**, they are well positioned to request auditing information as part of the contract, and can influence policy methods. Currently, the organisation doesn't appear to have a transparent reporting system to any external body.

5. Easier and cheaper appeals

Much of the criticism and concerns expressed by athletes of the current system have emerged because some athletes who are completely innocent or who have made a genuine mistake are treated in the same way as deliberate doping cheats. The routes of appeal are limited. You can either go to a national anti-doping agency tribunal or take your case to the Court of Arbitration for Sport. One solution might be that each country has a corpus of trained volunteers who could be invited to decide upon ad hoc appeals. Decisions could be made quickly so that the athlete can return to their sport.



To the point. agressti vanessa/Flickr, CC BY

6. Have critical friends

Anti-doping agencies and other sports organisations should invite guidance from other fields of expertise. If critics were treated with respect and invited to share ideas and propose solutions, then some fresh thinking might lead to real improvements. I was invited to leave the US Cycling Anti-Doping Committee simply for expressing ideas that challenged existing policy ideas and practice.



There are many people willing to help if the opportunity was presented to them. The first step could be as simple as an online forum for comments, criticisms and suggestions that are coordinated independently and presented to WADA. The present situation appears to be that if you are critical, you are not invited to join the discussion. Even media investigations have been attacked; witness the response from Sebastian Coe after blood doping revelations.

7. Start again

Everything above will have more chance of success if it is part of a completely fresh start to anti-doping that prioritises fairness and health in a more balanced way. Involving athletes at the heart of strategy and planning would help create values and processes that other athletes could buy into. Building trust by reducing systematic doping through targeted efforts would build confidence and a better sense of purpose. A more realistic and accepting attitude to accidental doping cases can avoid unethical and unfair impacts on athletes' lives.

Anti-doping is facing a crisis, the resolution of which may just require a re-orientation of objectives and methods based on key principles, values and innovative strategies. At the very least it would help to bring different perspectives together for a conversation on what has gone wrong, what needs to change and how best to move forward towards a different future.



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