

Drugs and sports

In the wake of the recent banning from international competitions of a Canadian athlete Ben Johnson, the World Health Organization (WHO) is publishing its first comprehensive report on drug use and sport. Based on information summarized from a variety of national programme strategies, evaluation studies, statistical reports, interviews and anecdotal evidence, the overriding conclusions of the report are that the use of drugs in sport is increasing and that more needs to be done to counter this trend.

Evidence on doping is emerging from various countries. One study of drug use in Australian sport between 1979 and 1982, found that 5.4% of the total sample of 4,064 individuals had used one or more diuretics, anabolic androgenic steroids or stimulants within the previous year. Evidence from a 1988 US study found steroids, commonly thought of as a drug of choice only among elite athletes, to have been used by approximately 6% of the 3,403 male high school seniors questioned. Out of the approximately 6% who had used steroids, 35% of those individuals did not intend to particulate in school sponsored sports.

There are other hidden health hazards, including the threat of HIV infection. In a 1990–91 evaluation of the Welsh syringe exchange programme, researchers were surprised to see numerous steroid users among those involved with the needle exchange which accounted for approximately one third of the needle and syringe exchange clients.

Earlier accounts of drug use in sports dealt primarily with stimulants and not the muscle building drugs, such as anabolic steroids. As sports activities became more popular, organized and commercial, the pressures to win and succeed were to have a fundamental influence on the sophistication of doping projects and techniques. It is clear that the

move to steroid use was influenced by these continuing pressures.

The WHO report stresses a lack of coordination between sport and health agencies at both national and international levels. In the absence of international standards or policies with respect to the regulation and distribution of potentially harmful substances it is very difficult to keep track of all possible violations. Even among research investigators, there is a limited degree of communication, including medical, social and educational initiatives. There is too much emphasis on drug testing strategies at the expense of other educational, training and prevention activities.

To address these issues, the report recommends that research activities and health promotion strategies be augmented by broad, international collaborative efforts. According to WHO, the development of an international data base on the use patterns of various substances is essential. The spotlight of international scientific research should be trained on the long-term health and social consequences of drug use in sport. There is a need for a proper analysis to be made with regard to the policies surrounding testing methodologies.

“There is a genuine concern that drug use in sport is rapidly snowballing into a serious public health issue”, said Mr. Hans Emblad, Director of WHO’s Programme on Substance Abuse. “There is growing evidence that doping in sport is not confined to the Olympic elite. More and more amateur athletes, including adolescents, are resorting to harmful, unsporting practices of drug abuse. This is an important public health problem, which WHO needs to address urgently.”

World Health Organization, Geneva