

Editorial

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The challenges facing anti-doping education

The fourth and final seminar of the ESRC funded series led by Barrie Houlihan was held in the offices of the new agency UK Anti-Doping on 24 February 2010. The offices are just off Trafalgar Square and next to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. The agency is the long awaited autonomous body that was previously located within UK Sport, the organisation responsible for the development and achievement of elite sport. It has established itself geographically but only time will tell whether it will create an environment of strong leadership, transparency, fairness and support for athletes.

The seminar focused on the question of anti-doping education. This is a subject close to the heart of many at WADA, and those involved with advising sports men and women through the different stages of their career. It is not my task here to ask what we learned from this seminar, as I can't do justice to the range of papers and the subsequent debates. However, I would like to make a few brief points on the subject of anti-doping education.

Firstly, the distinction has to be made (as was during the ESRC seminar) between information and education. WADA's provision of information based material does seem to have improved over the past few years. As any teacher knows though providing students with information is not the same as educating them. WADA have recognised this in their 'toolkits' – potentially useful ways of delivering anti-doping education through coaches, doctors and

parents – though it is unclear what some of training these ‘tutors’ will receive and if there are specific guidelines for dealing with athletes under 16 years old whose maturity levels, awareness and needs will be very specific.

Secondly, we cannot assume that athletes, coaches, doctors and parents actually understand the reasons for anti-doping and act as willing conveyers and recipients of the anti-doping message. It could be argued that the opposite is the case – those who are determined to win will seek out any potential advantage and therefore their attitudes to anti-doping will be largely functional, i.e. understanding how to avoid a positive test. This is a complex milieu with young athletes potentially receiving conflicting messages about success and fairness while not always being able to appreciate the subtleties of the WADA Code.

Thirdly, it is very challenging to imagine what a good anti-doping education programme would look like. There would have to be some element of compulsion and examination, otherwise athletes would probably not pay attention. Workshops would need to be engaging, interactive, easy to understand, but comprehensive. They would have to cover the complexities of the List, while also addressing social, personality, and cultural aspects. They would have to take into account athletes’ age, level, sport and attitudes to other forms of risk. They would have to be regularly delivered to small groups, be geographically diverse, internationally consistent, and would therefore involve substantial investment. It is far from clear how an effective and efficient programme might take shape.

Fourthly, any anti-doping education projects should include monitoring and evaluation from their beginning in order to gauge success or failure and to improve future policies. Yet, designing a methodology to evaluate is probably just as much of a challenge as designing the tuition and delivery. How can we assess the effectiveness of anti-doping education when the problems with self-reporting in such a secretive environment are well known? What would be the priorities – factual knowledge of banned substances and testing procedures, or personal ethics and behaviour? It would be hard to get benchmark data, and it would be almost impossible to isolate the anti-doping education programmes from other sources of information or influence. We don’t know the current or future state of play, so will never know how it has been changed by specific interventions.

These are real challenges. However, without good educational foundations the application of strict liability is morally flawed and could face legal challenges. An athlete could quite credibly argue: ‘How was I supposed to

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know substance x was banned? Nobody told me in terms I could understand'. And lastly, how could any anti-doping education put an end to inadvertent doping? These are muddy waters for any educationalist to dive into.

Citation suggestion

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