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Public perception of sport anti-doping policy in Australia

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Aims: An implicit rationale for anti-doping legislation is that doping damages the public image of sport and that this, in turn, has serious consequences for the sporting industry. However, there is scant evidence that doping impacts on public opinion, and even less so that it has dire consequences for sports consumerism. This study sought to fill a void in public policy debate by canvassing public opinion on a range of anti-doping policies and practices.

Methods: A representative sample of the Australian public ($n = 2520$) responded to a telephone survey with questions on performance enhancing and illicit drug use.

Findings: The majority agreed that clubs should be penalized if athletes were found to use drugs and that companies and government should stop sponsoring athletes who have been using drugs. Opinion was split on the issue of whether performance-enhancing drug use should be criminalized (slight majority in favour).

Conclusions: These results show that the Australian public support anti-doping measures. As anti-doping initiatives become more widespread, invasive and costly, policy makers will need to ensure that anti-doping legislation maintains strong public support.

arguments) typically wilt under detailed scrutiny (Buti & Fridman, 2001), and in some anti-doping regulations no argument against doping is actually stated. Nevertheless, an implicit justification for anti-doping, one that possibly alleviates the weaknesses in the health and fair play arguments is that doping is harmful to the image of sport (Waddington, 2000). In short, doping is a public relations problem with the potential to threaten lucrative television and corporate contracts with individuals, teams and sporting federations, as well as junior registrations and attendances at sporting events.

The extent of the public relations problem is reflected in the fact that US President George W. Bush (2004) raised the issue in his State of the Union Address. However, to date, there have been only a handful of studies of public opinion on the topic of doping in sport. In Switzerland, representative samples of the population were surveyed four times between 1995 and 2004 (Nocelli, Kamber, Francois, Gmel, & Marti, 1998; Stamm, Lamprecht, Kamber, Marti, & Mahler, 2008). Stamm et al. (2008) report that 96% of their sample saw the problem of doping in sport as 'serious' or 'very serious'. The vast majority (86%) of the sample was in favour of strict prohibition of doping, with the remainder favouring some form of liberalization. In each of the Swiss surveys, the vast majority of respondents agreed that doping was 'damaging to sport's image' (e.g. 97.8% agreed in 2004); that doping produced bad role models (96.1% in 2004); and contradicted the principle of fair play (95.2% in 2004). Additionally, the public blamed not only the athletes concerned, but also those in their entourage, such as coaches and sport federations.

It should be noted that the Swiss research has been heavily criticized (Mazanov & Connor, 2010), with

INTRODUCTION

The rationale for anti-doping in sport is often poorly articulated, so much so that some athletes and commentators have begun to question the legitimacy of anti-doping rules (Denham, 2011; Gilberg, Breivik, & Loland, 2006). The common justifications for anti-doping legislation (i.e. the 'health' and 'fair play'

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3 85 allegations of bias due to the fact that several members of the research team were employed by anti-doping organizations. In addition, Mazanov and Connor (2010) also argue that statements asking for agreement or disagreement, such as 'doping damages sport's image', will inevitably produce answers that support current anti-doping policy.

90 Despite these important criticisms, it is still possible that the public do in fact support the current anti-doping policy. A recent survey of public opinion conducted in Norway (Solberg, Hanstad, & Thøring, 2010) found that respondents had 'no tolerance' for athletes' use of substances whose purpose was clearly performance enhancing. Respondents were more ambivalent regarding supplements and other non-drug-based forms of performance enhancement. In addition, respondents favoured tough punishments from sponsors against athletes or teams involved in doping scandals. Respondents also viewed sponsors who continued with sponsorship of tarnished parties as 'accomplices' to doping.

105 Taken together, these studies suggest that the international public do care about the issue of doping and about the potential actions of relevant stakeholders, such as sponsors. However, their views are largely ignored or dismissed, which is surprising as large-scale surveys to elicit the views of athletes tend to produce similarly strong anti-doping attitudes and opinions (Dunn, Thomas, Swift, Burns, & Mattick, 2010). In a relatively unusual study, Breivik, Hanstad, and Loland (2009, p. 749) compared the anti-doping views of the public and athletes (in Norway), finding largely similar opinions. Some differences were that athletes showed even stronger anti-doping attitudes than the public (characterized as 'zero tolerance'), but with a larger percentage of the public (60%) favouring an increase in anti-doping work, compared to 31.6% of athletes (53.8% of athletes felt that current levels were sufficient). Such findings are in stark contrast to qualitative research using small samples of athletes that suggest that athletes can be quite 'libertarian' (Smith et al., 2010) and largely refute claims that the attitudes of athletes are different from those of dominant stakeholders such as Governments and National sporting bodies (Stewart, Adair, & Smith, 2011).

120 Poor public perceptions about performance enhancing and recreational drug use by athletes, coupled with anti-doping policy that does not reflect general community opinion about how to reduce, eradicate or educate athletes about the consequences of partaking in such behaviours could potentially cause significant damage to the sports industry (Moston, Engelberg, & Skinner, 2011). Despite this, there is still a dearth of research into public perceptions of anti-doping policy, including issues such as criminalization, making results public, penalties and actions that should be taken by key stakeholders. The purpose of this study was to canvass public opinion in Australia on these issues.

METHOD

It should be noted here that our research team had no conflicts of interest and the funding body did not in any way influence the survey construction, data analysis or interpretation. 145

Sample

Data were collected via a telephone survey of the Australian public (adults aged over 18 only). The sample consisted of 2520 respondents, randomly sampled from all Australian states and territories. Recruitment was in proportion to the population of each state, with additional quotas on age and sex. 150

Procedure

Interviews were conducted using a computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI) system. The advantage of a CATI based survey is that a large and representative sample can be accessed for a relatively low cost. The disadvantage is that response options are, by necessity, brief. Open questions are used only sparingly as they greatly inflate the time taken to complete the survey, and thus the cost. Interviews were conducted during July 2009 and each interview took between 8 and 10 min to be completed. 155 160

Survey questions

In the survey, a distinction was made between drugs known as 'performance-enhancing drugs' (such as anabolic steroids) and illicit 'recreational drugs' (such as cannabis). Respondents were told that they were not to take into account use of substances such as caffeine, alcohol or prescribed medications. 165 170

Respondents were asked a series of questions (all with yes/no response options) on the following themes: criminalizing performance enhancing drug use by athletes; making positive drug tests by athletes public; penalizing clubs for drug use by their athletes (two questions, one for performance-enhancing drugs, the other for recreational drugs); ceasing sponsorship of athletes who use drugs (again, two questions); ceasing Government financial assistance of athletes who use drugs (two questions). Finally, respondents were asked (open question, unprompted) to state the main reasons why performance-enhancing drugs in sport are banned. Responses were recorded verbatim. 175 180

Data analysis

Data from the survey were coded and entered into a computer-based statistical software package SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences, Version 17) for analysis. Descriptive statistics are presented in this study. 185

Ethics

Ethics approval for the study was granted by the Human Research Ethics Board of Griffith University. 190

RESULTS

Sample characteristics

195 Of the 2520 respondents, 1246 (49%) were male and
1274 (51%) female. Respondents were aged between
18 and 95 years, with a mean age of 46 years. Most of
the respondents had previously (or currently) played
200 competitive sport, with only 429 (18%) of the respon-
dents never having played competitive sport.
There were few clear associations between the major
demographics of gender, age and State of residence and
opinions. Results are thus summarized for the entire
sample.

Criminalizing performance enhancing drug use

205 Respondents were asked whether they thought that the
use of performance-enhancing drugs should be crim-
inalized, with investigations conducted by police
officers instead of sporting bodies. Over half of
210 the respondents (53%; *n* = 1336) agreed and 45%
(*n* = 1134) disagreed (with 2%; *n* = 50, unsure).

Making positive drug tests public

215 Respondents were asked whether they believed posi-
tive drug tests by athletes should be made public.
The majority (79.2%; *n* = 1996) agreed that they
should.

Penalizing clubs for drug use by their athletes

220 Over two-thirds of the respondents (68.5%; *n* = 1726)
agreed that the club should be penalized if their athletes
were found to use performance-enhancing drugs
(54.3% for recreational drugs; *n* = 1084).

Ceasing sponsorship of athletes who use drugs

225 Over 90% of the respondents (91.2%; *n* = 1574) agreed
that companies should stop sponsoring athletes who
have been found guilty of using performance-enhanc-
ing drugs (75.8% for recreational drugs; *n* = 1910).

**Ceasing government financial assistance of athletes
who use drugs**

230 Over 90% (91.4%; *n* = 2303) agreed that the
Government should stop providing financial assistance
to athletes who have been found guilty of using
performance-enhancing drugs (78% for recreational
drugs; *n* = 1966).

**Reasons why performance enhancing drugs are
banned**

235 Among the reasons given for performance-enhancing
drugs being banned (multiple responses permitted),
over three quarters of the respondents (77%; *n* = 1940)
stated that performance-enhancing drugs give athletes
240 an unfair advantage to those who take them. Of the
respondents, 20% (*n* = 504) stated that performance-
enhancing drugs are not good for athletes' health,
that they cause side effects and/or that these
side effects are dangerous; 15% (*n* = 378) stated that

the use of performance-enhancing drugs creates false
results or results that are not a true indication of an
athlete's skills. 245

DISCUSSION

250 The findings of this study show that the Australian
public are currently split on the issue of whether
performance-enhancing drug use in sport should be
criminalized, as is already the case in Italy and France.
The possibility that police officers, rather than anti-
doping bodies, conduct investigations might be
255 expected to deter potential users; however, we are not
aware of any data to suggest that doping is actually less
of a problem in either of those two countries relative to
other countries that have not criminalized investiga-
tions. This is an issue probably worthy of further
260 research.

For a range of other public policy options, the public
favoured strong anti-doping actions, with sanctions for
clubs and suspension of sponsorship from companies
and financial assistance from government, all receiving
265 strong endorsement. These results are comparable to
those of Solberg et al. (2010), suggesting that the
public endorse punitive action towards those athletes
who use banned substances. This finding lends support
to one of the 'second generation' of policies for the
270 management of drugs in sport proposed by Mazanov
and Connor (2010). If there are consequences of drug
use for sports governing bodies, in addition to the
athlete, this may foster institutional commitment rather
than merely compliance with anti-doping legislation
(Mazanov & Connor, 2010). 275

Whilst opinions were clearly opposed to both
performance-enhancing and recreational drugs, the
strength of support for penalizing recreational drug
use was consistently lower. These findings support the
280 conclusion of Dunn et al. (2010) that separate policies
regarding illicit and performance enhancing drug use in
sport may be required. Attempts to eradicate 'doping'
could thus be tailored to two distinct problems.

Limitations

285 There are limitations to this study. First, the measures
of opinion were designed to facilitate a telephone-
based survey, incorporating several yes/no response
options. This may conceal important data on a complex
set of issues. Second, respondents may have been
290 influenced by media stories about doping in sport
which were common at the time of data collection
(notably, stories about rugby league players using illicit
drugs). This may have heightened the awareness about
illicit drugs and thus potentially skewed the results.

CONCLUSION

295 The Australian public favours strong anti-doping
measures. As anti-doping initiatives become more
widespread, public support will be required to maintain

appropriate funding of testing programs and educational programs. There is currently only limited evidence that negative public opinion actually impacts on sports consumerism (Solberg et al., 2010), but an absence of evidence should not be mistaken for evidence of absence. There are clear indications that governments (e.g. in Australia and the UK) are taking public fears over doping seriously, with increased anti-doping research and tighter legislative controls being observed in each country. Sponsors are also showing signs of wariness, with the ongoing US Federal investigation into allegations of doping in the US Postal Service sponsored cycling team, illustrative of the broadening of anti-doping investigations beyond the confines of the sporting world. Future research should thus assess the impact of drugs in sport on a range of 'consumer' behaviours, such as attendance at sporting events, as well as the impact on sponsors and the implications for the future funding of sport. Given the clear trend in the results of surveys of public opinion, the possibility that doping in sport might be construed as a positive development seems extremely tenuous.

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