

Commentary: Should WADA remove the illicit drugs from the prohibited list?

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In this special issue, the papers of Waddington, Christiansen, Gleaves, Hoberman & Møller (2013) and of Henne, Koh & McDermott (2013) propose two opposite positions concerning the removal of illicit drugs from the WADA prohibited list. On the one side, Waddington et al. argue in favour of the INHDR call for WADA to remove illicit drugs from in-competition prohibition, and on the other side, Henne et al. provide the opposite position. From my point of view, the removal of illicit drugs from the prohibited list would be a mistake in the anti-doping fight. I reviewed the arguments of Waddington et al. that the 'social' drugs are not used to enhance performance but are used for 'recreational purposes' only. However, if we want to protect the athletes' health and the positive image of sport, I believe the best way forward is to keep the 'social drugs' on the prohibited list.

Negative side effects on the health

As Henne et al. underline in their paper, illicit drugs have negative side effects on the health. I believe that WADA cannot restrict the prohibition of substances to performance-enhancing drugs as proposed by Waddington et al., without taking the negative side effects of substances on the athletes' health into account.

Waddington et al. expose the problem that in some countries, such as the Netherlands, the use of marijuana is legalized and it is therefore difficult to ban it in sports only. However, an organization such as WADA has to take common decisions for all countries, and cannot take into account all singularities in each country. The protection of athlete health is a priority and the ignorance of the more permissive laws on 'social drug' use of some countries is meaningful in view of WADA's mission.

Effects on psychological capacities

It is difficult to confirm the performance enhancing effects of illicit drugs. Depending on the 'social' drugs and the type of sport, the effects of illicit drugs on performance are ambiguous. Even if the effects on physical capacities are not proven, 'social' drugs have proven psychological effects. From my point of view, we cannot dissociate psychological from physical capacities to explain a sport performance: at the highest level, the difference between two athletes is often more related to psychological than to physical aptitudes. Consequently, to argue, like Waddington et al., that marijuana has no performance-enhancing effects is a too restricted view of sport performance. To use marijuana may change the perception of the difficulties and of the pains and consequently permit the athletes to surpass themselves. We cannot ignore these psychological effects, even if the potential performance enhancing effects of 'social' drugs are not clearly established in scientific studies. Consequently, I believe that illicit drugs may affect sporting performance and to ban 'social' drugs is a guarantee to maintain a fair competition, as well as protecting the athletes' health.

A necessity to protect the positive and healthy image of elite athletes

Elite athletes are very mediatized and they have to project a positive and healthy image. I agree with Waddington et al. and Henne et al. that the 'spirit of sport', as third criterion used by WADA to prohibit a substance, is ambiguous. But I agree and it is difficult not to agree with the values related to the 'spirit of sport' such as health, equal opportunity, etc. If athletes use 'social' drugs, they do not respect the 'spirit of sport' and its values. Sport is always used to promote health, especially to the youth. Sport has to keep its positive and healthy image, and the prohibition of illicit drugs contributes to protect it.

The legalization of 'social' drugs in sports would probably have negative consequences on the sponsoring of sport organization and athletes. WADA, by prohibiting 'social' drugs, protects the image of sport and the possibility of sponsoring in sports which permits athletes to earn a living.

High social influences of the experienced athletes on the young ones

Young athletes identify themselves with more experienced athletes. If elite athletes smoke marijuana before a football match, the young athlete will be tempted to do the same. Even if there is no proof of their performance-enhancing effects, the young athletes could relate the use of marijuana to their performances. Interviewing some young cyclists hoping to be professionals, we have observed their vulnerability and the negative social influences of more experienced cyclists on doping use (Lentillon-Kaestner & Carstairs, 2010; Lentillon-Kaestner, Hagger, & Hardcastle, 2012). The health side-effects of the substances were not a brake in the doping use (Lentillon-Kaestner et al., 2012). WADA has to assume a protective role for young athletes who want to, at all costs, become professional and popular in their sport.

A change in WADA's criteria?

Finally, both papers reveal inconsistencies in WADA's criteria applied to ban a substance or method in sport. A method or a substance has to meet any two of the three following criteria to be prohibited by WADA: (1) a potential to enhance or enhances sport performance, (2) an actual or potential health risk to the athlete, and (3) a violation to the 'spirit of sport'. Waddington et al. propose to only keep the first criterion, Henne et al. propose to remove the third one. From my point of view, WADA would gain in coherence and clarity in revising the definition of the third criterion to reduce its ambiguity; nevertheless, it is necessary to keep it in addition to the two other criteria. The removal of this third criterion would complicate the prohibition or admission of some substances or methods. For example, without this third criterion, how can one justify that certain training methods (i.e., altitude training) are not prohibited as their primary aims are to enhance performance? With this third criterion, we can justify that the majority of training methods do not go against the 'spirit of sport'. Consequently, this third criterion is as important as the other two to justify the prohibition or admission of certain substances/methods.

References

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