

Survey amongst elite athletes; attitudes towards doping issues

O. de Hon*, K. Wiefferink, S. Detmar, T. Vogels & T. Paulussen
(Netherlands Centre for Doping affairs (NeCeDo) and TNO Prevention & Health, the Netherlands)

Introduction

Every four years, the Netherlands Centre for Doping affairs (NeCeDo) conducts a survey amongst Dutch elite athletes to evaluate the existing anti-doping policy measures and to assess the knowledge of doping related issues in this group. In 2002 the survey focus was expanded to include an assessment of the social-psychological determinants of doping use.

We used Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) and Bandura's Self-efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1986) to model determinants of doping use. According to our model attitudes, social influences and self-efficacy predict ones behavioral intention, which under normal circumstances will lead to a certain behavior, such as doping use. A pre-study consisting of literature research and personal interviews was performed to determine which factors may play a role in the decision whether to use doping or not.

Methods

A written, strictly anonymous, questionnaire of 131 items was sent to all Dutch athletes who are recognized as an "elite athlete" by the National Olympic Committee*National Sports Federation (NOC*NSF). In total, this amounts to 1748 athletes who compete at the highest international level.

Results

A total of 656 athletes returned the questionnaire (38%). Self-reported doping use was a mere 1.7%, which was too low to allow for a trustworthy comparison between doping users and non-users. In general, the attitude of the respondents was rejective towards doping use. This was most extreme in females, younger athletes and participants of Olympic Sports. No differences were found between individual and team athletes. The situations that were considered to be most prone to doping use, although still minor, were perceived pressure by coaches and team mates to use doping and the situation of revalidating after an injury.

Knowledge about doping related issues seldom correlated with the identified determinants of behavior. The knowledge about doping control procedures is good amongst Dutch elite athletes (on average 81% correct answers) and was increased in comparison with the survey conducted 4 years ago (74%). Younger athletes had less knowledge than their older colleagues.

Reacting to a variety of statements, 95% of the respondents found it important that doping use should be discouraged, 84% called for a better coordination of the conduct of doping controls, 78% was willing to undergo blood tests in addition to urine tests, and 63% stated that only substances and methods that are both performance enhancing and damaging to health deserve a place on the doping list. The most important measures to discourage doping use were good international coordination and education of athletes and support personnel.

The institution NeCeDo was known to 84% of the respondents, in comparison to 50% four years ago.

Discussion

The results should be interpreted carefully, as a selected response cannot be excluded. However, this survey shows that a large group of elite athletes is vigorously rejecting doping use. The results of this study will be used to design a behaviour targeting educational campaign. The negative attitudes towards doping found in this study should be confirmed and extended.

Knowledge about doping related issues does not appear to influence the attitudes towards doping use. However, informative education remains necessary in order to allow athletes to follow the necessary procedures surrounding doping controls. Informative education should be intensified in younger athletes.

The existing anti-doping measures were deemed adequate, but improvements are necessary in certain areas such as the international coordination of doping controls and more extensive education. Two thirds of the respondents advocated a doping list based solely on health and performance-enhancement issues.

References

Ajzen I. The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 79-211, 1991; Bandura A. Social foundations of thought and action: a social cognitive theory. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1986.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to acknowledge all athletes who have shared their opinions and experiences with us. The study was financed by the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports and by NOC*NSF.

