Speaker

Today I’m going to talk about a project I did in conjunction with some colleagues, and I must mention them: Dr. Steven Moston from James Cook University and Dr. Terry Engleberg who’s a Research Fellow in the Centre of Tourism, Sport and Service Innovation here at Griffith University. And we did some work that was supported through the Australian government Department of Health and Aging antidoping research program. And we looked at public perceptions of antidoping.

A rather topical subject. And there is often varying statistics about, or unofficial and official statistics about how much sports doping actually occurs in the Australian sporting community. The official version is taken from the statistics by the Australian Sports Antidoping Authority who in 2007-2008 conducted 6637 drugs tests and found 39 elicited adverse results, which resulted in about 0.6% of the total amount of testing. So that number would suggest that the amount of sports doping that is actually occurring is quite low or very low, and there is a very small incidence of it. The unofficial version, however, might suggest otherwise, as indicated by a procession of cases that we’ve seen in the media, and anecdotal evidence that we hear from other sources. For example, here are just some recent situations where athletes have been caught or being involved in sports doping. We have the examples here of Andrew Jones who was involved in recreational drug use, Michael Phelps, the Olympic gold medallist was also caught in a compromising position using banned substances. On the performance enhancing drugs side we had for example, recently, last year Reni Maitua from the Cronulla Sharks was banned for two years for using the steroid clenbuterol. And the athletics sweetheart of the track Marion Jones recently admitted to using performance enhancing drugs after years of denial. So the unofficial or the anecdotal evidence suggests that perhaps this type of behaviour is not as uncommon as the official statistics suggest.

So the background of this stage just briefly, then. As I said, it was commissioned by the federal department of antidoping program, and this study was commissioned to address, there were four particular areas that the department was looking for a research to be done into. This one was done to look at public perceptions of abuse of antidoping. If you look at it historically, Backhouse [03:31] has identified that only four studies in public perceptions of sports doping have been conducted in the international arena. Three of those looked at solely performance enhancing drugs. This study was designed to look at not only performance enhancing drugs but illicit recreational drug use as well. So it builds on a gap in the literature that was identified by Backhouse in 2007.

There were four particular key areas the study attempted to identify. Public attitudes towards doping in sport, where public antidoping concerns rate alongside other social priorities and issues, the public perception of what is necessary to provide them with confidence in the integrity of sport, and public expectations of suitable response from
government and sporting organisations to antidoping. I obviously won’t be able to comprehensively work my way through each of these aims, but I will give you an overview to give you some idea of the findings that we came across.

The rationale for this, I guess with sports doping there’s two competing positions on this. Position one that some people might have is: doping is part of sports; attempts to deter or ban such behaviour is inevitably doomed. So, no one cares anyway, it’s just an accepted part of professional sport or elite sport and we need to accept it as part of competing at that level. The second position presented is: doping is cheating and must be stopped. The integrity of sport is threatened. So there are two competing, I guess polarised views that many people take towards this issue. Some are set in the middle somewhere, but on the most we find these two competing views.

The data for this was collected, we used a professional market research company Roy Morgan Research and we recruited members of the public proportional to the population of each state with additional quotas based on age and sex. So we used a representative sample to reflect population of each site by gender and by age. And interviews were conducted by telephone. So the sample represented 16,475,000 adult Australians, and we sampled 2520 respondents. 51% were female, 49% were male and they were aged between 18 and 95 years of age. So we had a large range, and the mean age was about 46 years of age. The questionnaire that we delivered over the phone contained 40 questions, and each interview took about 8 to 10 minutes. And the main themes within the questionnaire were the perceived instance of performance enhancing drug use and recreational drug use, so what did the public consider to be the level of drug use by lead athletes, what did they believe to be appropriate sanctions or penalties for drug use, how serious is the issue, what type of education, legislation and policy should be developed, and who should take responsibility for drug use.

The results for us were quite startling, really. In terms of percentage of elite and professional athletes who take performance enhancing drugs we found that the population believed about 26% of elite athletes engaged in performance enhancing drug behaviour. So approximately one in four athletes are using performance enhancing drugs. Which is a significantly high number. The reasons for that we can hypothesize on, but probably some of it comes back to a level of cynicism that the public have towards the use of performance enhancing drugs, and the claims of innocence that have later been proved to be wrong, and athletes have actually been caught in some way or admitted to performance enhancing drug behaviour. And if we go back to the Marion Jones example before where we had an athlete, a world champion, an Olympic gold medallist, the darling of the Sydney 2000 Olympic games who for many years denied taking performance enhancing drugs, despite her association or relationship with people who had been caught taking those substances, the public gave her the benefit of the doubt. However at a later stage she admitted to perjuring herself and taking performance enhancing drugs and received a custodial sentence as a consequence. So the public becomes somewhat cynical of attitudes around it of athletes saying ‘no we don’t’, and I think that’s probably reflected in that figure that we’ve talked about. In terms of the use of recreational drugs, that’s illicit recreational drug use, that’s not including alcohol and...
legal substances, the public believe 33% of elite athletes are engaged in those behaviours. Again, probably reflective of the high media profile that these cases get and the level of cynicism that exists. Again, when you have athletes that are considered to be role models or held in high public esteem, for example, we talk about Andre Agassi’s recent admission to using crystal meth, and his way of alleviating detection by saying it was an accident or ‘it was accidentally put in my drink’, and at a later stage coming out and admitting to using it, again the public becomes somewhat cynical. So those statistics are rather high. If you dig a little bit deeper, sports in which performance enhancing drugs are perceived to be commonly used, I think some of these are probably self-explanatory. But as I said, there’s been no research to confirm public perceptions of this. When we asked the respondents to name those sports in which they thought performance enhancing drugs were most common, 20% of respondents indicated athletics or track and field, just under 20% weight training, lifting, about 18% for cycling. We then get into the football codes, we start dropping around 11%, 10% mark for League and AFL respectively, and swimming about 7.5% of respondents. So it’s not unusual that we would find the power sports to be those sports that were suggested by the public where these types of substances would be used. When we looked at recreational drug use, we found 35% of the respondents suggested AFL as being the most common sport where recreational drug use occurs, and 31% in rugby league. Again this is probably reflective of the Australian media where these cases were made public, whenever there was an opportunity to make them public, and therefore it’s something that’s in the public psyche or in the public mind more often than other sports.

Now sports where performance enhancing drugs are perceived to be rarely used, 14% said swimming, 13% tennis, golf, netball and cricket. So swimming is an interesting one and probably comes back to the reputation of our swimmers. The relatively small amount of the population believed these athletes were engaged in such behaviours. And again, perhaps in such a high profile sport in terms of the media publicity that it attracts, although when someone is caught for performance enhancing drugs it would no doubt make the press, but in the case of swimming, we have been fortunate that we had no swimmers being caught with that. And if we look at the recreational drug use again, perceived to be rarely used, swimming, again, this is probably reflective of the high level of esteem that our swimmers are held in. People like Tyrone Perkins, Ian Thorpe, Grant Hackie, Lisa Jones, Suzie O’Neal [11:59], all these type of swimmers who achieved greatness and have been considered by the public to be clean athletes. And this reputation that they have is probably reflected in some of the statistics that we received.

In terms of what the respondents considered the major issues that should be attacked in sport, abuse against women, 36% of respondents believe that should be the major issue that a lot of resources should be put into. But performance enhancing drug use was the second one with 22%, recreational drug use about 5%. 90% believed the problem of performance enhancing drug use in sport is serious, and 78% believed that the problem of recreational drug use is serious. So the public definitely believed that this is a serious issue.
This is an interesting one, where responsibility lies. 99% of respondents believe that the athletes should accept the responsibility. But there is also now a belief that responsibility should be shared by other groups that are associated with the athletes. For example, we can see in around the 60% mark between 60% and 65% that they believe coaches, the sporting club and the governing body should take some responsibility for the use of performance enhancing drugs.

Conclusions and implications. Well, the use of drugs in sport is no doubt seen as a serious problem by the public. Major stakeholders in sport including athletes, coaches, sporting bodies and government are expected to take action when athletes are found to be using banned drugs. So the public does expect some action to be taken. Attitudes towards recreational drugs was negative, and was consistently less extreme than against performance enhancing drugs. So what we found was that we had two distinct sets of attitudes towards drugs in sports, but related. So they are both seen as serious issues, however the performance enhancing drug use is seen as more serious by the general population. This is good current base-line data that we would like to use, and we would like to run this study in the future to measure how the policies that are laid down by the ASADA and other governing bodies are being addressed by sporting organisations, and consequently how the public is perceiving the implications of that policy on doping in sport, to see if those perceptions change over time. We are now looking at another study that’s looking at elite athletes’ and coaches’ attitudes towards sports doping, so that will make good comparative data against the public perception data as well in order when policies develop in the future about how to deal or manage this issue of drugs in sport.