

Performance-enhancing drug-use among amateur sportsmen and women in Cameroon: A study of knowledge, attitudes and practices

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The use of doping drugs in Cameroon is common. Even more common is drug-use among amateur sportsmen and women. Little, if anything at all, is being done to educate, raise awareness and sensitize sportsmen and women in the country about the negative health effects and criminal consequences of drug use in sports. Obtaining scientific evidence on the current situation was evaluated as necessary for informing ongoing and future programs and providing the tools for advocacy on the problem.

Objectives

This study sought to understand young athletes' doping behavior, circuits of acquisition of drugs, sources of knowledge, awareness and use of lawful/unlawful substances by young athletes; and to study perceptions regarding Cameroon's anti-doping measures.

Methods

The study was cross-sectional in design and utilized a multi-method data gathering strategy that combined quantitative and qualitative techniques. A face-to-face questionnaire was administered to 1,600 randomly selected young athletes from 7 major sport federations in Cameroon drawn from four study sites: Yaounde, Douala, Bamenda and Garoua. Questionnaire items addressed the following themes: Knowledge, perceptions of doping, and doping experiences. In addition, an interview guide was used to collect complementary qualitative data from key informants on the following: reasons for doping; strengths and weaknesses of current anti-doping measures; and the role each sector they represent could play to enhance doping prevention. Quantitative data was analysed using EPI Info and SPSS. Qualitative analysis was conducted using AnSWR (Analysis Software for Word-based Records). A content analysis of text based qualitative data allowed for deductive conclusions to be drawn.

Key findings

Knowledge of lawful and unlawful drugs including food complements

Knowledge of lawful drugs (55%), unlawful drugs (93%), and food supplements (84%) associated with sports was common. Study participants cited a wide range of performance enhancing substances but most notably, Banga (74%) and Cocaine (54%) as unlawful. Although there appeared to be an upsurge in doping drug use, doping prevention measures were not rigorously implemented. Only 11% of athletes had seen the country's anti-doping regulation. In the absence of formal sensitization, athletes were informed about drugs mainly through friends and the media and about negative side effects, by trainers.

Attitudes of athletes towards drug-use

Six percents of athletes believed that athletes dope out of necessity, while 19% believed that doping is essential for success in sports. Fifty four per cent of participants declared that doping use is common within their respective federations. Disciplines most affected by doping were cited to be football, athletics, boxing and cycling. About 34% of study participants said they were aware of colleagues who use drugs, while 41% knew of opponents who took doping drugs to improve their performance. Marijuana (locally

known as *Banga*) (44%), Guronsan (16%), and Cocaine (8%), were the most common doping substances used by athletes. Doping appeared to be approved by many coaches and encouraged by friends. Meanwhile, athletes who avoided doping did so mainly because they feared side-effects and not because they saw doping as unethical and illegal.

Circuits of acquisition of drugs

Sources of acquisition of doping substances included friends, dealers, the market and the pharmacy. More than half of athletes admitted to involuntarily using doping drugs. Managers, coaches, sports medics, as well as relatives were reported to be the main drivers behind the supply of doping substances to athletes. About 50% of athletes acquired unlawful natural substances and, 30%, unlawful chemical substances easily.

Implementation of anti-doping measures

Most athletes acknowledged the non-implementation of anti-doping measures within their federations. For those who claimed that anti-doping measures were implemented, 60% of them mentioned education, 19%, surveillance, and 11%, repressive measures. Only 17% of the respondents had undergone a drug test before in their sports career. Official doping controls were not conducted during local and national competitions and doping surveillance was neither routinely nor intermittently conducted.

External and internal pressures to use doping substances

Athletes reportedly faced external and internal pressures to use doping substances. Many doping offences were said to occur due to ignorance of what constitutes lawful and unlawful substances. Key informants reported that they were able to identify substances athletes often use, by sight and not by name, and were even less likely to categorize them either as lawful or unlawful. Key informants stated that the growing popularity and increasing commercialisation of sports was pushing young athletes to dope in order to succeed. The general perception by athletes that their rivals were already taking drugs and also that drug offenders were not penalised, appeared to encourage doping initiation. Additionally, poor knowledge of what constitutes doping appeared to render athletes susceptible to the negative manipulations of influential peers, trainers, managers and parents.

Conclusion

There is evidence that the practice of doping is growing rapidly among sportsmen and women in Cameroon. Anti-doping measures exist mainly in theory as they are seldom implemented in practice. Knowledge of what constitutes doping is notoriously limited and frequently distorted. Evidence from the data suggests an urgent need for measures to rescue the situation before doping becomes an institutionalized practice in Cameroon sports. For any initiatives to have an impact in the country, the gap between anti-doping policies and implementation would need to be closed. Rigorous implementation of preventive and repressive measures, e.g. education and sensitization, doping tests, penalties for doping offences, etc, is critically needed. A fair amount of evidence-based advocacy targeting policy makers could bring about the desired changes to both policy and implementation and ensure that an impending doping explosion is avoided in the country.