

Markers of transition phases in assisted performance enhancement in emerging young athletes

Project summary

Prevention of doping in sport is a challenging task, especially with the ever-changing terrain surrounding the key categories of functional food, supplements, minerals, herbs and botanicals, over-the-counter medications, prescription medicines and prohibited performance enhancing substances. The central premise of this project is that the gateway to doping is a sustained use of substances with the specific aim to improve or support athletic performance. Habitual engagement in a range of acceptable performance enhancement (PE) practices, such as using allowable nutritional supplements, may lead to using prohibited substances. Social cognitions regarding assisted performance enhancement play a significant role in this usage process. Further, the athlete's environment also influences engagement in performance enhancing practices.

Doping is a complex phenomenon. A significant amount of research has aimed to deconvolute the inter-relating factors which lead to doping behaviour, some with promising results. However, owing to the complexity of this issue, research has been segmented and whilst offering good insight into potential vulnerability factors, studies are often limited to a selected group of individual differences and/or situational factors. Assuming that a synergy of the contributing factors is needed to progress from one stage of assisted performance enhancement to the next, a study is needed which explores the individual and environmental factors (as well as their synergistic interactions) that underlie decision making at the critical transition stages regarding the use of performance enhancements. Given the importance of mid-to-late adolescence as a key transitional life stage, where young people develop their approach to drugs and alcohol, this cross-sectionally designed project will focus on emerging young talented athletes aged 14 to 18 years of age.

This project recognises that the effect produced by the individual factors or the combination of key factors is different from the sum of the individually established effects. This latter characteristic, if common across user groups, can serve to shape intervention content in order to facilitate effective preventive anti-doping education. Therefore the key driver for this project is to identify markers, along with their synergy, of transition phases in assisted performance enhancement with the view of identifying elements that can act as barriers to doping and health compromising performance enhancing practices. The emphasis will be on modifiable factors, such as social cognitions (attitude, belief, subjective norms and outcome expectancies).

In summary, the aims of this project are to identify: 1.transition phases in assisted performance enhancements and map these phases across chronological age groups of emerging young athletes; 2.social cognitive markers, along with their synergy, of transition phases in assisted performance enhancement; and 3.factor(s) that catalyse or can act as barriers to doping and health compromising performance enhancing practices.

Outcomes of this project will provide a useful insight into factors that influence athletes' decisions at various stages in their mid-to late adolescent life. The generated knowledge may inform WADA's current value-based anti-doping education programme or contribute to the development of new anti-doping preventive measures.