

MEDIA RELEASE

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Support crucial for athletes with drug problems

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) is concerned about the recent shift in government policy and public discourse on illicit drugs from harm minimisation to zero tolerance. This change goes against the weight of expert advice and scientific evidence.

There is no doubt that illicit drugs are harmful, and in terms of prevention there needs to be a strong message that people using such substances will be identified, and when they are, they will be firmly dealt with – this is the 'prevention' message that needs to go out to the population at large.

"The insistence on a 'one strike you're out' type of approach being advocated by the Government in relation to the Australian Football League (AFL) often exacerbates and reinforces the problems," said Amanda Gordon, APS President. "We need to ensure that athletes seeking support in relation to any problems with their substance use are not deterred from doing so."

The APS College of Sport Psychologists has been advocating a "second chance" approach balanced by strong controls within the sport. AFL policy may seem lenient but it involves stringent internal controls. In particular, as part of their contractual obligations AFL players commit themselves to an out-of-season testing regime that enables identification of problems that might otherwise go un-noticed, or surface too late for remedial action.

"At an individual level we believe there needs to be acknowledgement that the best 'treatment' for individuals is to keep them engaged in their sports, and to use the positive peer pressure and motivation of their sport involvement to bring their behaviour back into line," said Gordon.

"Many athletes are young people who are at risk of drug experimentation and use, and sport can involve high pressures that put people at risk of drug use. For some elite sports people, their high profiles and celebrity treatment can make them even more vulnerable than the general population. Indigenous athletes may be particularly vulnerable to these and other pressures."

"We are concerned that implementation of policies borne out of these political point-scoring debates may increase the risks to athletes mental and physical health and welfare, as well as that of members of the public who pay close attention to the lifestyles and habits of their sporting heroes," said Gordon.

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