

Performance-enhancing drugs at the Olympics



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With the Olympic Games drawing closer by the day, there's a great buzz around London and the country at the moment as excitement builds towards the beginning of the games in late July. Naturally the UK press are playing their part in this by whetting peoples appetites on a daily basis with articles about the sporting highlights that are due to come our way. Along with the positive stories however the media have also found room to cover some of the darker elements of international competition and in particular the use by some competitors of performance-enhancing drugs.

I've talked before about the use of medicines in sport, and in particular the careful role that doctors, physiotherapists and nutritionists need to play when administering medicines to athletes. Due to the rigorous and regular testing that takes place nowadays medical professionals need to keep up-to-date with guidelines set by the World Anti-Doping Agency and be

ultra careful to only prescribe drugs that don't contain banned substances. A single mistake could otherwise result in the end of a career.

Categories of drugs banned from sporting events such as the Olympics include anabolic steroids, peptide hormones, strong analgesic painkillers, stimulants and diuretics – all of which can have performance-enhancing effects and which are therefore deemed as cheating. Sadly the use of testing has had to become common place in recent years as history has unfortunately shown us that there will always be a minority of athletes who are determined to beat the system. Any who attempt to do so at this year's Games however will face a tough task to remain undetected.

Efforts to keep the London Olympics clean of drugs will be centred upon a £20m state-of-the-art laboratory kitted out by GlaxoSmithKline. The laboratory, which is the size of seven tennis courts, will be operated by scientists from King's College, University of London, in co-operation with more than 150 leading anti-doping scientists from around the world. The laboratory will operate 24 hours a day and many tests will have a turnaround time of 'next day'. This summer's Games will feature around 5000 separate urine and blood samples – about 10% more than at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. As well as the random sampling, all medallists will also be routinely tested.

Of course, as the tests get better then so do the methods used by cheats. For example, some experts anticipate a move towards drugs which are naturally produced in the body such as Human Growth Hormone or those which mimic their actions and are therefore difficult to detect. Athletes who remain tempted to

use performance-enhancing drugs however still run a high risk of being caught out eventually as after the Games blood and urine samples will be stored for eight years to enable retrospective testing on the samples when new tests for more drugs are developed. And looking even further forward, Qatar, who of course will be hosting the 2022 World Cup, have already opened the Gulf's first anti-doping lab with the mission of being at the forefront in the fight against drug taking in sport and being the 'leading anti-doping and research facility in the world'.

It would be naive to believe that all sporting events around the world can ever be completely free of performance-enhancing drugs, but it is good to know that continuing advancements in science and technology mean that we have the best systems possible to eradicate the drug cheats and to leave the way clear for true sporting champions to be just that! **MEH**

Durbin PLC is a British company based in South Harrow, London. Established in 1963, the company specialises in supplying quality assured pharmaceuticals, medical equipment and consumable supplies to healthcare professionals and aid agencies in over 180 countries. As well as reacting rapidly to emergency situations, Durbin PLC responds to healthcare supply needs from local project level to national scale programmes.
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