

## Time for sense: drugs in sport

An open letter

**As experts in the fields of medicine, drug dependency and law enforcement, we wish to make abundantly clear our positions on a number of matters in relation to the current 'illicit drugs in sport' debate.**

We believe that the AFL has been a leader in responding to illicit drugs. Its policies in relation to illicit drug use among players are probably as effective as can be achieved in a world where some young adults are exposed to, and will experiment with, illicit drug taking and the drug culture. Their policy clearly sends a message that drug taking is dangerous and not acceptable.

We further believe that the prime objective of any 'drugs in sport' policy must be the health and welfare of the player concerned. Where this conflicts with another objective of the club concerned, the AFL or the government, the player's welfare must be paramount.

We commend and support the AFL and the AFL Players Association for taking a reasoned, sensible and strong leadership stance in relation to these issues, and for resisting the pressures from populist quarters to use such issues for partisan ends. Such populist approaches ignore the mass of evidence that humane harm minimisation and treatment approaches to issues of illicit drug use are far more effective at diminishing drug-related harm to the individual and the community than are punitive 'name and shame' approaches.

The AFL's policy is, in fact, in line with current community practices towards people found to be using illicit drugs — they are most often diverted towards the drug treatment system and away from the criminal justice system. This approach is the policy of all governments in Australia, because the evidence is that it is far more effective in dealing with drug use and harm from illicit drugs than are punitive measures.

The blurring of the distinction between the use of performance-enhancing drugs and the use of illicit recreational drugs is potentially forcing upon the AFL and other sporting bodies roles for which they have no mandate or capacity — roles as law enforcement agencies. As good citizens, bodies like the AFL have the responsibility of deterring crime where possible, and reporting crime where appropriate — it is not their role to seek out and detect crime.

Rather than being criticised, the AFL should be applauded by governments, community leaders and the media for their approach. For those of us at the coalface of treating drug addiction and developing policy, watching the criticism is frustrating.

We congratulate the AFL and the AFL Players' Association, and encourage and support them in retention of the AFL Illicit Drug Policy.

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Dr Bruce Mitchell, President, Sports Medicine Australia

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Bill Stronach, CEO, Australian Drug Foundation

David Templeman, CEO (acting), Alcohol and other Drugs Council of Australia

Professor Ian W Webster, AO, Emeritus Professor of Community Medicine and Public Health, University of New South Wales.

Professor Steve Wesselingh, Director, Macfarlane Burnet Institute for Medical Research and Public Health

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