



Please find below an explanation of the AFL Illicit Drug Policy by Professor Jon Currie, Director of Addiction Medicine at St Vincent's Hospital and two colleagues, Dr Yvonne Bonomo and Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

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By JON CURRIE, Yvonne Bonomo and Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones

We are concerned that recent media reports emphasising an apparent disagreement between the Federal Government's policy on illicit drug use and that of the AFL, arise more from a misunderstanding of the AFL's policy than from any real differences in approach to illicit drug use. Unfortunately, this deflects attention from the common goals that are strongly held by both parties.

Much emphasis in the media has centred on the concept of "three strikes" for drug testing, with the clear implication that drug use by players is tolerated, and no action or intervention is taken by the AFL until a third offence takes place.

This is highlighted by the comments attributed to Peter Costello in the Herald Sun (page 1, May 22), including that the AFL drugs code, under which offenders are not named or sanctioned until their third offence, was not tough enough, and that the AFL code actually allows people to be caught using drugs like cocaine or other illicit drugs without any consequences.

This is not the AFL's policy.

The AFL has demonstrated that it has a zero tolerance for illicit drug use in its players, with a rigorous in and out of season drug testing program, and an immediate response for ANY and ALL positive drug tests.

However, while positive tests for performance enhancing drugs (eg steroids) are met with the full force of international regulations and sanctions under the WADA code (the same sanctions that applied to Wendell Sailor), the AFL has established the very appropriate and responsible policy of treating all initial findings of illicit, non-performance enhancing drug use as a health problem, with a sophisticated and comprehensive medical intervention as the first response.

This is completely in keeping with most other workplace employee assistance programs for illicit drug use, and is also directly supportive of the Federal Government's own policies, for example as set out in the "Talking With Your Kids About Drugs" information booklet that was delivered to all Australian families as part of the "Tough on Drugs" strategy.

Misunderstanding of the AFL policy appears to have arisen through the incorrect assumption that the AFL takes no action on the first or second occasion that a player is detected using an illicit, non-performance enhancing drug, leading to incorrect assertions such as "players can use illicit drugs without any consequences or sanctions".

In fact, the AFL's policy provides very stringent rules for medical intervention, treatment and rigorous follow-up drug testing for ANY detected illicit, non-performance enhancing drug use. However, in keeping with all employee-related health issues, this is initially performed in confidence at the level of the AFL Medical Commissioner and individual club medical officer, and includes appropriate counselling and treatment services.

Importantly, an initial episode of illicit, non-performance enhancing drug use or first relapse from treatment is managed as a confidential health issue. Quite responsibly, the AFL has not sought publicity for this, and so there has been little capacity for the AFL to emphasise this aspect of its policy.

As with most workplace employee assistance programs, third or subsequent illicit, non-performance enhancing drug use offences are placed openly before individual club managements and the AFL for assessment of treatment compliance, long term outcome potential and workplace risk.

It is instructive to note how closely this AFL policy mirrors the initiatives set out in the Federal Government's "Talking With Your Kids About Drugs" information booklet.

On page 17 of the booklet, in the section entitled "What to do if you think your teenager is trying drugs", it is emphasised that "...it is important that you discuss the issue...be open with them so that they are encouraged to be open with you". The response given to the question "Where do you go for help?", is "Don't be afraid to ask for help. A range of services and support is available to help both the person using drugs as well as their family and friends. Remember you don't need to handle a drug problem on your own. There are many places in your community - doctor, schools, churches and other organisations - that can provide support."

On page 19 it is stated that the Australian Government is undertaking a range of initiatives "...to establish a national drug treatment network...to bring treatment education and support services within reach of those who need it". Most importantly on page 20, in the section entitled "Diverting users", it is emphasised that "...in a major initiative, the Australian Government has allocated more than \$340 million to establish a national system to divert illicit drug users into expert assessment and on to necessary education and treatment....In this way drug users will be encouraged to take responsibility for themselves so that they can regain control of their lives."

The Federal Government is a world leader in developing these diversion and treatment programs.

A final aspect of the AFL's policy that is of critical importance, but rarely acknowledged or discussed, is the influence that it may have in encouraging young people with drug problems to come forward and seek potentially life-saving treatment.

The tragic legacy from illicit drug use of drug overdose, drug deaths and drug-related youth suicide are clearly documented. As in the past with epilepsy, asthma, diabetes, depression and other illnesses that young people may have trouble admitting or discussing, leading AFL players with these conditions have been role models in encouraging young people that these are health issues for which treatment is available and acceptable.

The current AFL policy clearly reinforces the Australian Government's message to young people and their families across Australia that no-one should use drugs, but that if you do have a problem or get into difficulties then it is first and foremost a health issue for which confidential, non-judgemental treatment is available. Treatment works, and all families should be encouraged and supported in seeking help as early as possible.

On all of this there is no disagreement between the Federal Government and the AFL.

(Talking with Your Kids booklet can be found at [http://www.drugs.health.gov.au/internet/drugs/publishing.nsf/Content/9605BE27A891311ECA2571680009D5BC/\\$File/parents_booklet.pdf](http://www.drugs.health.gov.au/internet/drugs/publishing.nsf/Content/9605BE27A891311ECA2571680009D5BC/$File/parents_booklet.pdf))

- Jon Currie.

OTHER COMMENTS REGARDING THE AFL'S ILLICIT DRUGS POLICY FROM VARIOUS EXPERTS IN DRUG TREATMENT

Dr Rob Moodie, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation:

"I am writing to add my support to the AFL's approach to the management of illicit drug issues. I know that the AFL complies with the WADA regime in relation to performance enhancing substances. The fact that the AFL has chosen, with the support of the Players' Association to address other illicit substances is commendable. Importantly, the Illicit Drug Policy both focuses on player welfare and reduction of use of illicit drugs in AFL teams. The strategies in place to reduce illicit drug use involving a series of confidential interventions is the most appropriate if the goal of player welfare is to be met".

Professor Nick Crofts, Director, Turning Point Alcohol & Drug Centre:

"Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre is a leading agency in Victoria in relation to alcohol and illicit drug treatment and policy issues; as such we are deeply involved in developing rational and effective practice and policy on alcohol and other drugs in many areas of life and with many communities.

"From this background, I am writing to commend the AFL in its approach to the management of illicit drug issues among its players and urge you, with any support we can offer or provide, to hold the line against those who call for quick fixes based on emotion rather than evidence".

Professor Margaret Hamilton, Member, Australian National Council on Drugs:

"I am aware that the media and community regularly call for tough, confrontational naming and blaming type responses. In my experience, these are most unhelpful in actually achieving behavioural change. While there is a place for confrontation within a trusting, supporting counselling relationship, this is not usually helpful if and when it is public. My own approach in working in this area for over 35 years has always been to maintain a stance that is both humane and pragmatic. My reading of the IDP suggests that it is consistent with this approach".