

Andrea Petróczi: What do we know about (the wicked problem of) doping in sport?

Doping is frequently labelled as ‘wicked problem’ without much thought given to how this ‘wickedness’ manifests in problem recognition and how it impacts proposed solutions. Research activities in doping and anti-doping have exponentially increased in the past 25 years from to about 50 to 450 outputs a year, demonstrating progress in improved testing methods and sensitivity, better understanding of the behavioural drivers, increased number of educational programmes and interventions, as well as progressing toward closing the gender gap among scientists. Yet, one must ask what practical difference we have made. Surprisingly little is known about the prevalence of doping.

Preventive efforts aiming to protect clean sport and clean athletes are notably lacking understanding of the meaning of ‘clean’ in sport, athlete identity, performance and performance-enhancement, and there is a scarcity of research into motives for clean sport behaviour or the role of personal values underpinning anti-doping education. Progress in social science research in anti-doping has been hindered by one or a combination of the following factors: (1) small number of ‘career anti-doping researchers’ with sustained engagement; (2) myopia of the Western European dominance, (3) researchers’ limited hands-on field experience, (4) lack of connection to other fields outside sport from where anti-doping can learn, adopt or make sensible shortcuts, particularly in understanding what are the factors whereby an internationally funded entity unable to extract itself from the failed rules, cases, standards, systems and processes it has built for itself and the global anti-doping community in the last twenty years, (5) lack of engagement with elite sport and athlete population which result in conclusions and recommendations from research being drawn from experiences of university students and student athletes, (6) impenetrable academic writing (with often mandated focus on theories, not practical implications), (7) ill-informed research priorities and overly restrictive rules for grants and briefs for contract research, and (8) unaccommodating research environment at academic institutions which favour classic academic credits over societal impact. Only by exposing each, and tackling them head-on, an honest and open dialogue between academics, practitioners, funding bodies, publishers, peer reviewers and HE institutions could emerge, and new, progress-focused arrangements could be formulated. In doing so, an honest examination of feasibility of a globally harmonised closed-loop system that demands compliance but is indifferent to effective performance is warranted, along with a fundamental re-think into what research constitutes paradigm change with the anti-doping system, rather than what constitutes tinkering within the existing system, with a particular concentration on the reasoning and intent behind what types of research is chosen, funded, and distributed. If we do not act, we might, collectively and unintentionally, fossilise anti-doping research to the point of futility, and thus become part of the problem, not the solution.