

UKAD submission to Independent Drugs Review

Image and Performance Enhancing Drugs

This is a submission from UK Anti-Doping (UKAD) to the second phase of the Independent Drugs Review being led by Dame Carol Black.

This will focus on our concerns regarding Image and Performance Enhancing Drugs (IPEs).

About UKAD

UK Anti-Doping is the national organisation dedicated to upholding confidence in clean sport. Every day, we are raising awareness of the issues through our extensive education and smart testing programme.

We help athletes to understand and follow the rules and prosecute offenders.

Our functions include:

- a prevention through education programme
- intelligence-led athlete testing across more than 40 Olympic, Paralympic and professional sports
- investigations and exclusive results management authority for the determination of Anti-Doping Rule Violations (ADRVs)

We are a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) which is accountable to Parliament through the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).

UKAD has a clear remit to protect sport from doping and whilst the use of anabolic steroids is prohibited in sport, it is becoming increasingly clear that this is a wider public health issue that needs addressing.

We have the power to ban people from participating in sport where they have been found guilty of an offence. We do not provide treatment programmes.

Impact of steroids

Class C substance

The most well-known IPEDs are anabolic steroids such as testosterone, nandrolone and stanozolol, which are frequently injected.

Steroids are a Class C Controlled Drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. Production and supply are an offence for which a maximum sentence of 14 years can be given along with an unlimited fine. Simple possession however is not an offence. In 2017 the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs established a working group to examine IPEDs.

In 2017, UKAD made a submission to the ACMD, stating the organisation would welcome a legislative change whereby the importation and exportation of anabolic androgenic steroids would be illegal (even when carried out for personal use). It was further proposed that growth hormone releasing factors (GHRFs) should be controlled in the same way as human growth hormone (somatropin - Class C). However, at the time of writing this, the group have not issued any report or recommendations and the Chair position remains vacant.

The responsibility of regulating the use of, and access to, IPEDs in the UK crosses a number of bodies including; UKAD, the Food Standards Agency (FSA), the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency,(MHRA), Trading Standards, police forces, the National Crime Agency (NCA) and Border Force.

Increasing use of IPEDs

In January 2020 UKAD released a report on steroids and other performance and image enhancing drugs. Experts suggest the number of individuals using steroids in the UK is close to, and more likely over, one million people, and according to a 2016 IPED survey, half of these users took steroids for improving body image or for cosmetic reasons.

Social media and TV are becoming more and more dominated by a specific body type with a focus on 'ripped' muscles. Young men in particular aged 20-24 can be lured into a false reality and in some cases may seek to obtain this 'look' by using steroids.

Impact of using steroids

Regularly taking anabolic steroids can lead to physical and psychological changes in both men and women, as well as potentially dangerous medical conditions such as heart attack, stroke, high blood pressure, blood clots, liver and kidney failure.

Links have also been made between increased aggression and the use of steroids, leading some experts to believe it has an impact on domestic violence and assaults.

Low priority with police and public health agencies

Where there is a market for illicit drugs, there are criminals willing to exploit this market. This could be as dealers, manufacturers, importers or all three. Low-cost online purchases of these substances can take place easily on the internet and the 'Dark Web'. Fuelling this criminal interest in IPEDs is the potential for very large profits to be made and a low risk of law enforcement interest.

The cash value of these drugs can be very high and can be used to pay for other organised criminal activity. One case, that UKAD was involved with, saw a criminal gang apprehended who were running a £65m steroid operation¹.

Yet UKAD believes the importation and distribution of steroids remains a significant problem. There are roughly five million doses of anabolic steroids seized per year at the UK Border.

Treatment services

There are few treatment services provided for those using steroids. A few services have been started in areas where steroid abuse has been particularly prevalent. A needle exchange clinic specifically for steroid users was established in Newport in 2017. The Newport needle exchange clinic by the Gwent Drug Misuse Service was set up after they identified a marked increase in people using steroids and other IPEDs. It was the first dedicated clinic of its kind in Wales, and needle exchange centres across the UK are recognising the growing requirement to support patients who are using IPEDs.

Open Road, an alcohol and drug charity received more than 1,800 visits across its five sites in Essex between January and September 2018, and distributed 100,000 needles to IPED users in 2018, as part of its needle exchange programme. The programme, while not encouraging drug use, ensures users have access to clean, safe needles, rather than re-using old equipment and being at risk of contracting blood-borne viruses.

Limited research

The way that effects and deaths related to IPEDs are recorded means it is very hard to establish, without commissioning specific studies, the total impact of IPEDs on health.

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-50425979>

Frequently, where IPEDs have been used and affected the health of an individual or contributed to or caused the death of an individual, the IPED used is not always recorded or referenced. Medics or family may not be aware of IPED use and the IPED use may not have been the primary cause of death.

Recommendations

UKAD recommends a cross governmental national strategy for minimising the harm caused by Image and Performance Enhancing Drugs.