Kenyan Athletes’ Experiences with Anti-Doping Education and the Challenges of WADA Code Implementation

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For decades, Kenyan athletes have dominated middle and long-distance running. Unfortunately, this has been accompanied by frequent doping violations, tarnishing Kenya’s success. The Anti-Doping Agency of Kenya (ADAK) is mandated by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) to implement anti-doping educational programming in Kenya. However, ADAK has limited capacity to do so. Previous research reveals that Kenyan athletes’ access to anti-doping education is insufficient and their knowledge of doping is poor (Boit et al., 2015; Chebet, 2014). Moreover, WADA (2018) reports that doping in Kenya uncoordinated and opportunistic. Given the challenges faced by ADAK, it is important to understand athletes’ experience of current educational efforts, so that these efforts can be improved. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine athletes’ experience with anti-doping education and to discover factors that impact its delivery.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eleven elite Kenyan athletes, five of whom had represented Kenya internationally. Athletes described their experience with anti-doping education and interaction with ADAK. Additionally, two anti-doping educators were interviewed to discuss program delivery. Two researchers coded the data and themes were derived deductively using the interview guide while allowing for the emergence of themes inductively.

The results indicated that Kenyan athletes had negative experiences with educational initiatives for multiple reasons. First, although anti-doping educators asserted that information sessions were beneficial, athletes thought sessions were too brief and shallow. Second, these efforts were viewed as meeting ADAK compliance mandates as opposed to educating athletes. Third, athletes reported their first introduction to anti-doping initiatives was from doping control (i.e. testing). This, coupled with the frequency of testing, led athletes to view ADAK as a surveillance operation, not an educator. Thus, distrust was further fostered between athletes and ADAK’s educational efforts. Fourth, educational material was not delivered in athletes’ preferred local dialect or Swahili. Consequently, athletes relied upon unofficial sources for doping information, which led to the acceptance of myths and fallacies that endanger athletes to intentional and unintentional doping practices (e.g., supplement or herb consumption). Complicating the relationships athletes have with ADAK was a perception that some athletes receive preferential treatment and protection from Athletics Kenya, who work in collaboration with ADAK. Pressure to dope emerged in two themes. First, poverty, the perception that athletics was a way out of poverty, and success of Kenyan athletes internationally all served to increase the temptation to dope. Finally, contradicting WADA’s (2018) report, athletes knew of a network of doping suppliers and how to easily obtain doping substances.

The findings highlight the challenges of implementing anti-doping education in a non-Western context. With its limited resources, ADAK will need to be creative in how they tackle doping in Kenya and rehabilitate Kenyan athletes’ image. This will require changing athletes’ perception of ADAK by acting as an education partner and not a surveillance operation. Delivering education in appropriate formats, frequency, detail, and language may require partnerships with outside agencies to assist (schools and universities). Such efforts may help build trust with athletes and serve to promote anti-doping efforts in Kenya.