CONFERENCE REVIEW

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Sport and Mental Health Conference: From Chemistry to Communities Melbourne, Australia 6-7 March 2006

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I am pleased to have been provided with the opportunity by Monash University Department of Community Emergency Health and Paramedic Practice to attend and report on this very informative and successful conference.

The conference was held on Hilton on the Park in Melbourne on the 6-7 March 2006. The conference was timely in that it was held just prior to the Melbourne Commonwealth Games and provided the opportunity for a range of attendees, including current and past elite athletes, to contribute over the two days. I certainly enjoyed sharing tables with some very famous faces during discussion sessions.

Melbourne Cricket Ground

The conference was organised by the Department of General Practice, School of Primary Health Care, Monash University. And the organising committee included representatives from King's College, London and *beyondblue*: 'a national, independent, not-for-profit organisation working to address issues associated with depression, anxiety and related substance misuse'.¹

The welcoming address was provided by Professor Richard Larkins AO, Vice-Chancellor and President of Monash University; the opening address was presented by The Honourable

Jeffrey Kennett AC, Chair beyond blue: the national depression initiative and the guest of honour at the conference dinner was John Landy, AC, MBE, Governor of Victoria.

Keynote speakers and panel members included: Dr mark Anderson, Ms Ruth Anderson, Reverend Cameron Butler, Colonel Antony Cotton, Mr Peter Ellingsen, Ms Dawn Fraser AO MBE, Mr Brendan Gale, Mr Craig Hamilton, Dr Nancy Buang, Dr Graeme Hyman, Mr Ron Joseph, Dr Peter Kelly, Mr John Konrads, Professor Jayashri Kulkarni, Dr Michael Martin, Mr Garry McDonald AO, Professor Patrick McGorry, Mr John Mendoza, Ms Claire Mitchell-Taverner, Dr Rob Moodie, Ms Assunta Morrone, Professor Kerry Mummery, Mr David Parkin, Dr Harry Unglik, Mr John Wasser and Mr Roland Perry.

As can be seen from this list there were certainly some notable and diverse speakers – from researchers to internationally renowned (mostly retired) athletes. There were also a number of paper/poster presentations. Space does not allow me to summarise each of the presentations, so I will provide what I believe to be some of the key highlights and messages.

From the onset it was clear that there were three distinct themes that emerged from the conference although they, at times, became confused during the panel and group discussion sessions: the first of them related to the mental health issues associated with those involved in sport, in particular elite athletes, during the course of their careers; the second related to the same issues in the context of their retirement from elite sport and the consequences of moving from a position of being in a position of high public profile to one that often receives little public notice; and the third related to the benefits of sport/exercise in the management of mental health (both therapeutically and in terms of prevention) in the community in general.

One of the key messages that emerged is that sport/exercise alone is not the answer to addressing mental health issues when referring to elite athletes and, indeed, any athlete and the community in general. The answer is more likely to lie in ‘balance’. This may include sport/exercise but also such considerations as family/social support, positive outlook, a passion for whatever one undertakes, plenty of laughter, and so forth.

It was clear from the conference that mental health is an issue that is receiving considerable priority attention from government and other research and program funding bodies and there are considerable research, clinical and other programs presently being undertaken, many of which are innovative and exciting their potential; and bode well for the future in terms of improvements in the prevention and management of mental health (leaving aside pharmacological research).

As presented by Professor Leon Piterman in closing the conference, we have only just touched the surface in exploring the links between mental health and sport and the conference attendees have the opportunity to move forward and provide significant international leadership in this area. The issue of mental health is one that is developing considerable interest and the number of people experiencing mental health issues is predicted to grow as the world community changes. The care of the aging community in China was provided as just one example of a case where it is recognised that this is may present a considerable problem to the Chinese Government over the coming decades.

The conference was well organised and presented some innovative research and programs, and stimulating discussion from attendees from a variety of perspectives. The conference, however, appeared to frequently cross topic areas in terms of presentations, panel discussions and group discussions (the conversations cafes) that caused interactive dialogue to constantly

move between and, in my view sometimes confuse, separate issues. The conference could have perhaps have been separated into two themed days: one that explored the issues associated with elite athletes in particular; and one that explored the potential benefits of sport and exercise in assisting to address mental health in the general community.

One of the most refreshing and enlightening aspects of the conference was the willingness of many of the retired very high profile athletes present (and one or two other high profile individuals) to openly discuss the mental health problems that they have either experienced in the past and/or are still experiencing and the strategies they are attempting to engage to deal with them. They were all passionate about 'coming out' as a mechanism to help reduce the public stigma associated with mental illness for the ultimate benefit of all – both sufferer and observer.

Reference

1. Beyond blue: the national depression initiative. [homepage on the Internet]. Australia: 2000 [updated 2006; cited 2006 Aug 8]. Available from: <http://www.beyondblue.org.au>.