

THE AGE

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We need more than a cultural 'reality check'

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JOHN Fitzgerald's call for a "reality test" on illicit drug use (Opinion, 28/3) is timely but flawed when his focus is a limited cultural reality check, claiming that "people can and do perform at the highest level and use illicit drugs". Does this make it all right?

Amphetamine-based drugs such as "ice" are called "steroids of the brain" precisely because they do enhance performance. The reason that steroids, used to enhance muscle performance, are banned is precisely because they offer an unfair competitive advantage to the user.

Professor Fitzgerald's flawed conclusion is to revise our expectations and maybe go easy on illicit drug use in sport, based on the argument that 32 per cent of 20 to 29-year-old men and women in the community have used drugs in the past 12 months anyway. This position is countered by the West Coast drug experience, which reflects a long-standing serious social concern in that state, beyond sport, which prompted a parliamentary report in 2004. That report coincides with the period when some of the current footballers became addicted.

I agree, our national and global drug response needs to be based on evidence. Recent research evidence suggests we spent US\$2.4 billion (\$A3 billion) globally in 2003 on prescribed amphetamines-like drugs. Australia, along with the US and Canada, showed significantly higher than expected use. Illicit trafficking can never be accurately costed — not just in dollars, but also in terms of social tragedy, as we witness now.

Surely, evidence goes beyond just use and cost. The evidence should include how the addicted stars cope after retirement, given that addiction does not stop just because the last goal was kicked. Our reality check should include how our stars cope years after use of performance enhancing drugs.

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