DOPING HARMS the children of athletes

Many former doped East German athletes still suffer severe side effects, which have also been passed on to their children

by Kirsten Sparre

An athlete’s doping past may well come back to haunt on his or her children. New research on 52 doping victims from the former East Germany shows that the majority of their children have damages to their social, physical or mental health. And the damages are worse if it is the mother that was drugged as an athlete.

The research on the long-term effects of doping has been undertaken by Dr. Giselher Spitzer from Humboldt University in Berlin. Over a period of two years, he interviewed 24 women and 28 men who were all Olympic or elite-level athletes in East Germany during the 1970s and 1980s and were given different types of drugs to enhance their performances without their own positive knowledge or consent.

Presenting his findings at Play the Game 2007, Spitzer concluded that doping is dangerous not only for the generation that was doped but also for the second generation, and can lead to severe mental health problems such as depressions, auto-aggression and suicidal tendencies.

Damaged athletes

The long-term effects can be divided into two groups: Direct effects on the athletes themselves and effects on their children.

Over 90 per cent of the athletes experienced strong damages to their skeletons which makes it almost impossible to hold down a normal job. 27 out of the 52 former athletes could not stand up for very long, 26 could not lift anything and 25 could not walk normally. Holding things was impossible for 21 of the former athletes and eight could not sit for long.

A quarter of the athletes interviewed suffered from cancer, and more than a third reported problems of auto-aggression and thoughts and attempts at suicide. More than 60 per cent suffered from or had had therapy for psychiatric issues.

Damaged children

Having children also turned out to be problematic for the former athletes. Between them the interviewed athletes lost 15 children during pregnancy and three children were stillborn. The risk of miscarriage and stillbirth in the athletes was a staggering 32 times higher than in the normal German population.

Of the 69 children that survived, many struggle with allergies, skin illnesses and asthma. One in ten children had crippled arms, legs or feet and almost as many had metabolic diseases. One in seven children had psychiatric disturbances.

“There is a clear tendency: Children of mothers who were drugged typically suffer more from multiple handicaps than children of drugged fathers. 54 per cent of the children suffer from two illnesses,” Spitzer said.

The value of studying effects

Spitzer undertook the study in order to find out what help doping victims need and how to prevent similar systems from emerging in other countries. But the catalogue of documented long-term effects leads him to believe that the value of health could be a strong motor for anti-doping work.

“The ‘body capital’ is a very concrete guide for athletes who have to decide from competition to competition if they want to abuse drugs or not,” Spitzer said.

In the former East Germany, such a choice did not exist. Athletes were told that the drugs were vitamins and minerals and help for training and recreation. Still, a quarter of those Spitzer spoke to had actually stopped taking the drugs at some point because they felt uncomfortable. A difficult decision, Spitzer acknowledged, as none of them knew what would happen to them if they defied the system.

FACTS

The project in brief

- Research undertaken from 2004-2006
- Documentation of 60 life courses of doping victims
- All interviews were tape recorded and files and medical sources were copied. All protocols were authorised.
- Reported in a book by Giselher Spitzer: “Wunden und Verwundungen”: Opfer des DDR-Dopingsystems
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The value of studying effects

Research by Dr. Giselher Spitzer from Germany documents long-term damages to the social, physical or mental health of doped athletes and their children.