

# Is it time to legalise performance drugs?

There are occasions when society makes a major adjustment to its thinking - and I'm wondering if performance-enhancing drugs might be next.

That might sound outrageous. But apparently so once was the idea of enfranchising women, openly paying athletes, decriminalising homosexuality, allowing recreational use of marijuana (witness a couple of dozen US states), and legalising prostitution, abortion, and euthanasia (several countries)...and allowing lifting in rugby lineouts.

Human nature being what it is, people find a way around most prohibitions if there's enough money in it. It's surprising Prohibition lasted as long as it did in America (13 years to 1933).

It seems that big shifts happen when some ill-defined point is reached in a public debate and the majority deems change is preferable; a battle is declared lost because the cost of enforcement is seen to outweigh the merits of what was thought to be a non-negotiable ideal...or just prejudice.

A tipping point is usually involved. A case like that of recently cleared All Black Patrick Tuipulotu could be enough to hasten the process of changing what appears to be a charade.

That many professional sports people, New Zealanders included, have been involved in the use of performance-enhancing drug-taking for a very long time surely cannot be denied. Some were caught, but others have got away with it.

As much was said by Jack Ralston in a book he published in 2011. The top Kiwi coach and administrator - who spent a lifetime in sport including years with the New Zealand Rugby Union - said a couple of All Blacks confided that they had to take drugs to bulk up.

Consider human growth hormone. It was synthesised in 1981 for the treatment of various medical conditions, such as lack of growth in children. It was immediately seized on by athletes as a way to hasten injury recovery and, perhaps in conjunction with steroids, enhance size and performance.

Sylvester Stallone swore by it, even though he was busted at the Ozzie border for bringing in 50 vials of what he portrayed as the elixir of eternal youth.

It's hard to detect by testing users, but one noticeable sign may be "frontal bossing", a side effect of acromegaly, which is associated with too much growth hormone. Of course, "Neanderthal brow" may simply be the result of legal food supplements or excessive body contact. Google image pages show the condition recedes after retirement.

Illegal drug taking by sports people seems incomprehensible these days, given the draconian measures sports authorities employ to catch miscreants, the risky side effects, the social stigma attached to being found guilty, and the doubt researchers have raised about the efficacy of most drugs.

But the risks apparently seem worth it to some young, under-sized, over-played contact sports people keen to land a fat contract that may last only a couple of seasons before career-ending injury.

The fact only one New Zealand rugby player is currently banned seems too odd to be true. That Fairfax NZ was brave enough to reveal the Tuipulotu case is commendable, even if

JT column for Feb 18 2017 – performance drugs

consequences for the player are out of proportion, given the even odder finding after an inordinate delay that the second half of his routine sample was found to be okay.

Is it time for change? There may be some sort of public mind shift happening if the recent visit by disgraced cyclist Lance Armstrong is any indication. News coverage showed him being feted by admirers, which must have exasperated those still committed to exposing drug cheats.

Obviously, any major change would need to be carefully managed. Given the long-term health risks posed by performance drugs, takers would have to be pre-tested, counselled, supervised, and made aware of consequences. All the things, in fact, that now apply to most of the legalised one-time social "evils" listed at the start of this column.

And could you legalise all performance drugs? Likely not. A meth-crazed sports participant might enjoy short-term benefits, but the collateral risks don't bear thinking about.

The question society must ask soon is whether some form of regulated drug use would be preferable to the current state of play, in which obvious signs are ignored and some sports and countries appear simply to have given in to the inevitable.

It's a state of play in which a young man who appears to have done nothing wrong now unfairly finds himself with a dented reputation and three months missing from his promising life.