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Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Inquiry into adaptive sport programs for Australian Defence Force Veterans: Submission by Dr Jonathan Lane, Hobart, Tasmania.

Dear Committee Members,

I am a LTCOL in the Army Reserve and have been either in full-time or part-time service since 1989 as an Other Ranks soldier, Medical Officer, and Psychiatrist. I work as a clinician in private practice with The Hobart Clinic; with DVA and Open Arms (OA) as a senior advisor on a 0.5 FTE at the executive level; and at the University of Tasmania. I am also involved with Military and Emergency Services Health Australia (MESHA), which is the organisation delivering a peer-led psychoeducation and skills-based program called 'Group Emotional And Relationship Skills' (GEARS). This program was developed from my PhD through the University of Adelaide where I evaluated another program for military, veteran, and first responder personnel. GEARS is now being delivered in Hobart, Adelaide, and Canberra, and the ongoing evaluation of this program has also received some funding from the Defence and Veterans Suicide Royal Commission. I am also involved in work with another Ex-Service Organisation Mates 4 Mates, which is funded by RSL Queensland. Finally, I am also involved in the veterans community through a range of other activities.

This submission will cover some of the TOR, but also the structural and specific elements I have noticed about the Invictus Games (IG) teams in IG18 through to IG22 whilst in my role as the Archery Coach from 2017 to 2022. These points are written from my perspective as a psychiatrist and veteran Mental Health (MH) specialist, as well as from a member of staff. I am happy to provide a copy of my CV to add to the context of this submission for further information if desired.

Please find my submission to this inquiry detailed below.

Summary:

- There is substantial anecdotal evidence about the benefits from participation in the Invictus Games (IG), as there is for the US Warrior Games. Unfortunately, there is very limited evidence for the benefits. This is because there has been no funding for any research of the outcomes of the activities, etc., from participants, and therefore no actual evidence to point to regarding the potential benefits.

- There are mechanisms in place that help individuals' MH during their IG involvement, but there should be a formal parallel process to improve MH and interpersonal functioning just like there is for physical health. In this sense, the IG program should be considered as a journey of physical, mental and personal growth.
- Athlete's MH history should be provided to medical staff to identify those who would benefit from engagement in programs to improve emotional regulation and interpersonal and relationship functioning to ensure personal and mental health growth occur during the IG engagement.
- Athletes should be demonstrating involvement and commitment to a sport prior to selection, as well as plans for how they will continue engagement after the Games are finished. They should be involving their local community through presentations during the journey and on completion to ensure they remain connected to their communities, and therefore keep the process of growth continuing after the Games are finished.
- There should be a process for athletes to consider their own journey over time, and to be able to form a narrative about their physical, mental and personal growth; the privilege of being the focus of so much personal attention; how their families have enabled and supported their participation; and how they intend to continue their growth over the longer term.
- These processes of personal knowledge of their journey of physical, mental and personal improvement, along with demonstrated commitment to post-Games purpose, should set them up to be 'the master of their fates, and the captain of their souls'.
- Finally, formal evaluation with quantitative outcomes should be done to demonstrate the evidence base of benefits to the individual from the IG program. This information would provide justification for further funding, promotion of the program, and enhance opportunity for involvement with other organizations.

Terms of Reference:

(a) current evidence on the benefits adaptive sport can provide to those with physical and/or mental health impairments, particularly those who have also served or trained in national defence:

There is little current peer reviewed research about the benefits of adaptive sports, or even outdoor activities, for military and veterans. An older review article by Kendal Bird 'Peer Outdoor Support Therapy (POST) for Australian Contemporary Veterans: a review of the literature' (Journal of Military and Veteran Health, 2014) provides some context for the field. There is strong support for activities or programs that involve peer support however, and this is the basis of the ADF Adaptive Sports (AS) program. IG and AS essentially utilises athletes participating in sporting competitions as peer mentors, and this is thought to have a positive impact on participants' physical and mental health. As athletes in these programs have direct access to a psychologist on the AS staff, this is also presumed to enable them to improve their mental health (MH). However, there is no research or evaluation of this process, hence no direct evidence of the potential benefits of involvement in both the IG and AS programs.

Due to my involvement in IG since 2017, I can see there are clearly large potential MH and other benefits for people who participate in the IG process, but they are not currently being captured. I understand that there have been previous attempts at capturing some data for research and evaluation in the Australian context, but I am also unsure of the efficacy of these, or the impact they have had.

I would recommend a brief clinical and functional evaluation framework and process be developed to produce quantitative data for evaluation of any benefits. As an example, comparisons could be done between the Invictus Pathways Program (IPP) from Uni SA to IG participants. Potential measures should include some form of psychological distress, quality of life, perceived resilience, etc. A project of this nature would be relatively simple to get Defence & DVA Human Research Ethical Committee (DDVA HREC) approval for and would give IG Australia hard data to support further funding, especially when combined with the individual and future community benefits described above.

There is expertise within the IG staff (Major Tavis Watt, staff psychologist, and myself), to conduct such research. Additionally, such research would also fall under the remit of the Defence Health Research Group (who I also work with), hence could be done 'in-house' utilising ADF staff time and funding. Any potential evidence should be published in a peer-reviewed journal to advance the evidence in this area, as it is clearly lacking. However, such evidence should also support and guide future funding, etc. I would be happy to be involved with this going forward, and have advised as much to BRIG Phil Winter.

Other Terms of Reference Points:

The following TOR points will be addressed together further below, as my statement doesn't easily or neatly fit into these separately:

(b) the role of sport in supporting individuals' transition from the Australian Defence Force into civilian life, especially how sport may assist veterans who meet criteria identifying them as being most at risk of suicide;

(c) the Australian Defence Force's use of adaptive sport;

(d) whether there are any gaps in services and demand for adaptive sport by the veteran community, and, if so, how these gaps can be addressed;

(e) the equitability of current funding for adaptive sport, and how the accessibility of adaptive sport can be improved for veterans who are not a part of Invictus programs;

(f) the potential for a centralised authority to play a role in coordination or resourcing to provide access and where appropriate, enable consistency, in the use of adaptive sport to support rehabilitation, transition or reintegration for serving members and veterans around the nation and across support services and organisations;

(h) any other related matters.

Background:

Over the 2018 and 2022 Games I have noticed that there have been a few individuals whose MH stability or functional capacity has been impaired. This is unsurprising given all competitors must have either medical or psychological injuries to participate in the games in the first place. Athletes therefore go into the games selection process with potentially unknown vulnerabilities, which they then carry with them through the process. These vulnerabilities have then had an impact on the overall team functioning and cohesion at times, as well as resulting

in significant time/effort cost to staff. It also raises questions about what happens to them after the Games finish.

This is not unsurprising, and indeed part of the selection criteria for athletes should be that their MH can benefit from participation. I feel that a primary problem with the AS process is that there is currently no formal mechanism that makes improving an athlete's MH an explicit priority of the program.

I strongly support the Adaptive Sport Program, but I feel that because we prioritize the sporting aspects of the program, we are missing opportunities to also have an impact on the athletes MH and personal growth. As such, some individuals with MH or emotional regulation problems can cause interpersonal difficulties for team staff and other athletes, and there is no process to ensure that these people, along with other less-impaired individuals, can have improved MH outcomes from their IG participation.

Finally, because the IG process only enables very few athletes to participate, the potential physical and MH benefits of the wider AS program are then minimised to these few individuals.

Specific MH and Personal Growth Opportunities:

This also raises the question of what specific MH and personal growth benefits could be added to the IG program. By this I mean that participation in the program over 12+ months requires the athletes to have a strong sense of focus on their sports. This gives them a sense of mission and purpose through the competition, but it also means they have psychological contracts with their coaches and family/supporters that they will prioritize their training over other aspects of their lives. This allows them to defer life, family or other responsibilities because of their involvement. The focus on the athletes as individuals therefore comes at a cost to other aspects of their lives, including those that their families and support networks bear for them.

Additionally, because the focus is on those individuals and their performance over that short period of the competition, it can result in a loss of balance for some individuals. They are given the message that 'being here is a victory' but the personal aim is for medals, to be a winner, and to receive the publicity and acclaim that winning medals gives them.

If their sole focus is performance, measured during one day of competition, then this narrow external focus means they can conflate their personal self-worth with their performance results. If they fail to achieve medals, they can fall hard. The athletes can therefore struggle to see the context of how their participation is a brief moment in their lives, winning medals is a transitory moment of glory, and they still have to have a normal life after it all finishes, even if they do win medals.

There is little formal focus on how their personal 'journey' provides them a context for what they did before, and need to continue doing, after the Games finish. Due to this, participants can struggle to find other ways of having a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives. They can struggle to find activities to fill the gaps left by the training schedule and routine because they can fail to understand the context that their participation in the Games was a brief period of their lives.

I feel we could be doing better to help them understand that there are other benefits they gained from participation, and they need to continue the habits, routines and focus they had during this time after the Games have ended. In this sense, by developing the narrative of physical, mental

and personal growth over their time of involvement, they have a much better understanding of how they are ‘the master of their fate and the captain of their soul’.

In thinking about these matters, I had the following questions:

1. What specific mechanisms do we have to identify those athletes with MH issues and to improve their general social and interpersonal functioning during their involvement?
2. We have sessions covering individual MH on the camps, and this is essential for managing issues as they might arise, but what could we do to help people thrive? What structural and program mechanisms do we have to focus on the athletes’ MH to ensure that it improves over the duration of their involvement with the Games?
3. While there is some attention paid to post-Games life, when the focus goes off the athlete and their performance because the games are over, what do we do to prepare them in a sustained, meaningful and comprehensive way for life afterwards to ensure their personal growth continues?
4. How do we help the athletes have the conversation with their partners or support people as the Games draw to a close that they now need to redirect their focus back to these people, to thank them for what they have done, and to let them have more equity in time, etc?
5. How do we develop processes that help the athletes integrate the different aspects of their experiences over the period of their involvement to ensure they are prepared to transition back to ‘normal’ life after the Games, whilst still maintaining the benefits and gains they developed during this period.
6. In short, how does the IG process demonstrate that it produces better people, who are a benefit to their personal and wider communities, after the Games have finished?
7. Finally, how do we gather evidence for this to ensure sustainability and longer-term funding?

The discussion below will be divided into the selection process of athletes, management of potential mental health (MH) issues, and how AS could potentially provide longer term benefits to the athlete and their communities.

Structural and MH Summary:

- There are mechanisms in place that help individuals’ MH during their IG involvement, but there should be a formal parallel process to improve MH, interpersonal functioning, and personal growth just like there is for physical health. In this sense, the IG program should be considered as a journey of physical, mental, and personal growth.
- Athlete’s MH history should be provided to medical staff to identify those who would benefit from engagement in programs to improve emotional regulation and interpersonal and relationship functioning to ensure personal and mental health growth occur during the IG engagement.
- Athletes should be demonstrating involvement and commitment to a sport prior to selection, as well as plans for how they will continue engagement after the Games are finished. They should be involving their local community through presentations during

the journey and on completion to ensure they remain connected to their communities, and therefore keep the process of growth continuing after the Games are finished.

- There should be a process for athletes to consider their own journey over time, and to be able to form a narrative about their physical, mental and personal growth; the privilege of being the focus of so much personal attention; how their families have enabled and supported their participation; and how they intend to continue their growth over the longer term.
- These processes of personal knowledge of their journey of physical, mental and personal improvement, along with demonstrated commitment to post-Games purpose, should set them up to be ‘the master of their fates, and the captain of their souls’.
- Finally, formal evaluation with quantitative outcomes should be done to demonstrate the evidence base of benefits to the individual from the IG program. This information would provide justification for further funding, promotion of the program, and enhance opportunity for involvement with other organizations.

Selection of Athletes:

I feel that it would be helpful to have clear guidelines for selection of athletes which includes the goals of participation, and therefore how this would benefit the particular individual and their wider community.

This would include prioritization of the criteria for selection, including athlete’s current sporting performance, and their potential to benefit from the non-sporting aspects of the IG program.

The following opinion points are some of the more specific aspects of selection:

1. Along with their physical medical information, potential athletes should provide a MH summary including diagnoses, current treatment (medication, psychiatric, psychological), and past MH history (medication, psychiatric, psychological). I suggest there is a need for this information so that coaches can be aware of potential issues with individuals, but also so that coaches can then identify those individuals who are struggling to medical staff for further MH support. Having this information would allow the medical team to refer/direct those individuals into further treatment, as needed.
2. If potential MH benefits from participation are identified for an individual as a reason for selection, this increases the need for this information so that staff can manage lower than expected performance, potential interpersonal conflict, outside resource support, etc.
3. I feel there is a need to ensure there is criteria that potential athletes are currently competing at a minimum of a local level in a sport that they are intending to compete in. I raise this point as I feel that if they are not competing in some form of sport they cannot demonstrate commitment, and are at a significant training, support, and resource disadvantage. They will also have not yet demonstrated the capacity to cope with the intense training requirements for their sports, which is even more important given they are competing in multiple events. Finally, current participation and/or competition demonstrates their motivation and capacity, as well as integration within their local community, and therefore should ensure these individuals can benefit most from their involvement in the IG program.

4. Selection should also include a statement about what they will be able to give back to their community during and after the completion of the Games. They should be able to identify further participation goals in their sports such as higher-level participation or competition, getting coaching qualifications and coaching teams, etc. In short, the Games are a huge investment in time, cost, etc towards these athletes, and therefore they should be able to demonstrate how those benefits more than just them, but also their community. This will also demonstrate longer term commitment to the IG values and reinforces the expectation that they will continue to actively demonstrate the values through their behavior over the longer term to help others. This should help demonstrate that IG are not just about individuals competing in a single Games, but rather a process of increasing community benefit through adaptive sports.

Invictus Games and Adaptive Sports: the potential for improved mental health and personal growth over the longer-term.

I feel there is currently limited formalised structure to identify how an individual can benefit from IG or AS involvement because this is not able to be articulated in the selection criteria. Furthermore, how this engagement at the individual level can potentially directly benefit the wider community or encourage wider AS engagement from the veteran community.

I would suggest the following as potential strategies that could be implemented for specific MH and personal growth benefits to the athletes:

1. Those individuals whose histories, or who demonstrate interpersonal, disciplinary, or other issues, be directed to undertake clinical treatment and/or programs outside of the IG framework.
2. Athletes should be encouraged and directed to identify and manage their own MH needs, as this is required for effective functioning both during and after the Games have finished. As discussed above, athletes should engage in appropriate services for these needs if and as they arise, with the management plan and clinician details being provided to the team medical staff. The benefits of doing this include improved protection for the individual, the team staff, and the reputation of IG, while enhancing the individual's personal growth. Such activities provide the individual with more appropriate help than solely relying on IG staff and reduce the likelihood of downplaying MH concerns to improve chances of being selected.
3. Improved MH should be prioritised as an outcome from involvement in either IG or AS. Athletes with identified needs, or even those considered vulnerable, should have access to, and be encouraged / directed to participate in some of the programs offered by Open Arms (OA) and other organizations early in their participation time. Examples of these programs includes the Anger Management program from OA, and the Group Emotional And Relationship Skills (GEARS) program offered by Military and Emergency Services Health Australia (MESHA) group.

These forms of programs are not just aimed at treating a specific diagnosis, but rather they have content and skills to help individuals function better within their own lives

through improved emotional regulation and better-quality relationships with those they are close to. These improvements make them more stable and capable people, therefore benefitting their sporting performance and capacity to function in everyday life. Further information about the GEARS program can be found here:

<https://mesha.org.au/resources-and-support/our-programs/gears-program/>

or requested from this author. Finally, engagement in these sorts of programs would value add to the athletes personal growth during their involvement, and mitigate potential risks to vulnerable athletes or those in need of further support.

4. Ensure there is an identified time and process for athletes to reflect on what their participation has cost their partners / supporters. This could be done before the Games, after they have finished their events, and on the journey home from the Games, but it needs to be a formal process. It should be something that is written down, and athletes need to have the opportunity to discuss it in small groups to normalize their expectations about what happens after the Games, and what a privileged position they have been in over the last 12 months. Programs with content relevant to these points are offered by OA (a relationship program), and it is specifically addressed in a number of the relationship sessions in GEARS. This should ensure the athletes develop some insight into these aspects of their journey, but also to help them adjust to the loss of privileges of priority of time and attention when the Games finish, as well as helping their partners feel their efforts have been recognized and valued.
5. There should be some requirement for athletes to do at least some form of community presentations during their involvement, both before the Games and after their return. This could include a presentation at their children's primary or high school, a local Lions / Rotary / RSL club, etc. The point in doing this is to help them reflect on what they are doing, and what has happened to themselves over their journey in a formal manner, to identify their challenges, benefits, strengths, how they have grown, and what they are going to do in the future. The requirement of doing a presentation in this manner to an audience ensures they complete this internal evaluation and awareness exercise, and again stops their lack of ongoing participation in IG from stopping their own personal growth. It also has the added benefit of raising the profile of the individual in their local community, promotes IG Australia and the benefits of adaptive sports.
6. Participants should demonstrate how they intend to continue their personal growth after completion of the Games. Again, this reinforces that the Games were a brief period of time in their lives, and therefore gives them a narrative context for 'before, during and after'. This could/should come from the goals they identified for themselves during the selection process (as discussed above), but this ensures that their IG participation is not just a moment in time, but part of their own personal process of development.
7. Finally, the potential benefits to individuals are not being captured as there is no formal evaluation and outcome process. Potential means of addressing this was described in the first TOR above.

Thank you for taking the time to read and consider this submission. I am happy to discuss this further should the Committee members desire more information.

Sincerely, Dr Jonathan Lane, FRANZCP,