



Australasian College of Sports Physicians
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Women in Sport and Recreation in Australia

Paper prepared for senate enquiry

Australian College of Sports Physicians

Health Benefits

The health benefits of exercise are well documented worldwide. There are specific health benefits in all age groups from children to the more senior population in maintaining exercise. These include weight management, weight loss, maintenance of muscle strength, reduction in numbers of diabetics, reduction in hypertension and heart disease, reduction in strokes events. In children there is an improved concentration and general well being. Children who exercise are less likely to be overweight or to develop diabetes. Specific benefits of women exercising before, during and after pregnancy have also been documented. There is evidence of improved mood, decreased risk of gestational diabetes and decreased weight gain during pregnancy , even with moderate exercise.

Accessibility:

Characteristics of women not participating in sport:

Pregnancy/mothers of young children

The first pregnancy is often the beginning of the end of exercise for a woman. Not only has exercise traditionally been discouraged during pregnancy but on becoming a mother the constraints of child rearing make exercise more difficult. Not surprisingly weight gained during pregnancy is not usually lost and this is the start of increasing weight and decreasing activity in a woman's life that is often difficult to reverse.

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Educating both women and their doctors about the benefits (and low risks) of exercise during pregnancy is important. Discussing the importance of exercise as an ongoing part of life and using strategies to incorporate it into a life that now involves children would be an important strategy to prevent women stopping exercise at this time of life.

Of concern is the issue of childhood obesity. There are increasing numbers of children who are overweight or obese in the population. These children are less likely to be comfortable to participate in sports both in their school years and into their adult life. This compounds the problems these women have with fatigue, weight control issues and the risk of heart disease and diabetes later in life.

One of the important strategies we should develop is the increased participation of children in sports for fun and fitness. Not all sports should be team orientated or performance based. There should be an emphasis on inclusion and participation for fun and fitness. This allows for the inclusion of fitness activities such as aerobics and dance as well as mainstream sports such as basketball and netball.

Constraints on women in sport:

The pressures of maintaining a job and perhaps a family are two of the strongest constraints women have in maintaining their own sports. It is a significant load to run a household, care for young children, taxi the family to all it's commitments, work and then find the time to fit in their own sporting activities. Time clearly is one factor in constraining women.

There are additional pressures with childcare so Mum can participate in sport. It is often difficult to find careers for the children within the home and generally none are provided at the sporting venues or clubs.

Timing of events is often on the weekend which can make participation more difficult as well. The addition of evening or daytime events may help to improve this situation.

Retention of athletes:

Keeping sport as an important aspect of senior school activities will help to maintain more girls in the ranks of sport as they leave the school age group. Many sports programs become optional as the senior years approach in school and this potentially allows many girls to lose their fitness and enthusiasm for sport.

Allowing and perhaps encouraging children to accompany their mothers to sporting events may allow for a better retention of athletes as they begin to have families. It is well to remember that the years with small children take

many senior athletes out of sport and then it is more difficult to recruit them back. The provision of childcare as a routine at sporting venues and clubs would go a long way towards improving this situation. It is also worth considering that having children attend training with their mothers is exposing another generation to exercise and encourages younger athletes to consider that having children does not mean exclusion from sporting teams. (Netball Australia have allowed small children of athletes and support staff to attend training sessions with their mothers)

Government Grants:

There are no grants available specifically to increase numbers of female Sports Physicians via their training at the Australasian College of Sports Physicians. There would be a great advantage in having larger numbers of female Sports Physicians trained – see comments under women in leadership roles.

There are specific medical issues that relate to women in sport which sometimes result in the loss of our female competitors. Grants specifically for the development of research into these areas would be of great assistance in preventing and treating these problems, thus improving retention of athletes. The Australasian College of Sports Physicians is ideally placed to develop this research.

Women in Leadership roles

The Australasian College of Sports Physicians has increasing numbers of women who are specialist Sports Physicians. It is important to have a significant proportion of female Sports Physicians as they are able to provide medical support for female athletes in both injury prevention and management of injuries. There is an increasing understanding of medical sporting problems that are specific to women in sport and require expert management. Areas such as Exercise in Pregnancy, Management of amenorrhea (menstrual disorders) which can lead to stress fractures and Osteoporosis management the older female population are important in maintaining these women in their chosen sports.

As the number of female Sports Physicians increases there is greater opportunity for sporting teams to have a female Team Doctor. This provides expert medical care but also allows the athletes access to women in these leadership roles. There is also opportunity for the Team Doctors to have input at a management level in the sporting body which allows further direct input into sporting organization to benefit the female athletes.

The Australasian College of Sports Physicians is a self funded training body within the medical community fully training medical graduates (doctors) to

become specialist Sports Physicians. If there was funding available from the Government it may be possible to train larger numbers of doctors to help expand this important aspect of women in sport.

The Australasian College of Sports Physicians has women in leadership roles on their council, there are and have been female college members holding the positions of vice-president, treasurer and general member.

At the recent Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games the Medical Executive Committee was comprised equally of men and women.

The Australasian College of Sports Physicians actively supports female athletes and will continue to assist with leadership and training of female sports physicians, as well as promoting its members in leadership positions.

We are happy to be further involved in discussion and implementation of positive programs to improve the quality of lives of all those females participating in sport in our communities across Australia.

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