



STEROIDS IN SCHOOLS - IT'S SERIOUS

Stark warning from rugby doctor who treats growing numbers of schoolboys

By GLORIA EDWARDS Picture: PAPI MORAKE



Sport medicine specialist Dr Henry Kelbrick cautions parents not to pressure boys so much to perform on the rugby field.

■ 'THE RESULTS CAN BE HEART PROBLEMS, STROKES, EVEN DEATH'

■ 'BOYS GET ACNE, ENLARGED BREASTS, STRETCHMARKS'

■ 'THE SUBSTANCES ARE EXPENSIVE BUT FREELY AVAILABLE'

■ 'DON'T TELL ME PARENTS DON'T KNOW THEIR SONS ARE DOING IT'

STEROIDS are used freely at at least five leading Pretoria high schools – English and Afrikaans medium.

Parents and coaches know about it and blatantly allow it. That's what bothers him most, says Dr Henry Kelbrick, former Blue Bulls rugby player and a sport medicine authority.

"Since 2004 the number of cases at my consulting rooms has doubled," he reveals. "In the past two years I've treated up to five boys a week."

"The pressure on high school boys to get into the first team is so great they can easily become hooked on illegal substances."

The results can be acne, enlarged breasts, high blood pressure – even, in the most serious cases of long-term use, heart problems, liver disease, lung infections, diabetes and strokes. Even death.

Those are the risks faced by thousands of schoolboys across South Africa who dream of playing top-level rugby and use illegal substances to help them achieve their goal. And they're not deterred by the possible consequences, it seems.

Statistics tell the story – use of these substances is increasing.

And the consequences, even from short-term use, are frightening.

"The boys become depressed and aggressive," Dr Kelbrick says. "Their muscles tear,

and those who inject the substances develop abscesses on their skin from the needles. That's without even mentioning the long-term consequences.

"The kids are young, talented and ambitious and are easily influenced by their schoolmates, coaches and parents. Then I end up with the problem."

FOR months Pieter Burger kept quiet about three of his rugby mates injecting illegal steroids.

While in matric last year at a prestigious Johannesburg high school he found out that two of his first-team mates,

PARENTS, WATCH OUT FOR THE SIGNS

Sports medic Dr Henry Kelbrick says general signs that indicate substance abuse by boys include:

- A bigger appetite
- Insomnia
- Acne
- Aggression
- Depression
- Stretchmarks, especially on the upper arms and thighs
- Needle marks, usually on the buttocks
- Muscles that tear easily

then 17 and 18, and a 17-year-old friend in the second team were using illegal substances to improve their performance.

"They got the steroids from a man at the gym," he says. "They're easy to get. I don't think our coach or their parents knew about it. I was at a friend's home when his dad commented, 'Hey, son, the hours you're spending in the gym are starting to show.'"

"They carried the injection needles around in their sport bags and injected themselves after school at someone's house. They inserted the needles so badly they sometimes left horrible marks but they were so focused on performing well they didn't mind. They were more aggressive than they'd been before."

Pieter confronted his friends. "I remember the panic in their eyes when I said people were coming to conduct tests at the school. I said I was going to tell the principal and their parents about it."

Two of the boys later acknowledged that using the steroids made them feel unsettled.

"You see it all over. After a school holiday a friend will look as if he's been working out in a gym for years."

THE use of stimulants by teen boys is a countrywide problem, according to the SA Institute for Drug-Free Sport (Saidis).

At the annual Craven Week tournament for schoolboys one player tested positive this

year for illegal substance use; last year four did. Among the substances were potentially fatal horse steroids which aren't cleared in SA for use even in horses.

"Chequebook rugby is to blame," Dr Kelbrick says. "A school will buy players from another school and the rugby unions offer lucrative contracts to talented young players."

"Parents want their sons to be noticed. And don't tell me they don't know they're doing it. Where does a boy get R3 000 for ampoules of banned substances?"

The substances are expensive but freely available on the internet, he says. "You'll find them with a simple Google search."

A Sunday newspaper reported recently at least 10 websites offered banned substances and the Hawks, the police's special investigations unit, was investigating them.

Sometimes the suppliers are coaches. Dr Kelbrick says it's common for them to tell young players in under-15 or under-16 teams they need to gain weight before they can be considered for the first team.

"Coaches put pressure on young boys to weigh the same as provincial-level players," he says. "It's a competitive environment – 50 per cent of the pressure comes from coaches, 50 per cent from parents."

"You arrive at a match and notice how the players have changed since the last time you saw them. They look like 21-year-olds and as if they've played at provincial level for three years. It's unnatural. The boys even get

stretchmarks on their arms and legs."

Dr Kelbrick says he's often shocked by parents' ignorance when they bring their sons to him. That was echoed in recent news reports on a father whose son had tested positive – he said the boy's coach had told him the substance he'd used was less dangerous than coffee or cigarettes.

"That's not true," Dr Kelbrick says. "And it isn't only banned substances that cause health damage. Even widely available diet supplements can be life-threatening."

Parents put tins full of the stuff on my desk. If used long term they can cause kidney and liver problems if the user doesn't take in enough fluids."

Dr Kelbrick's golden rule is healthy eating habits, an appropriate exercise programme and a good nutritional supplement that isn't used excessively.

"Research has shown that a healthy cooked meal does far more for a sportsman than a supplement. You can't get all your meals from a tin."

He warns against using unknown supplements that promise overnight results. "Supplements such as Ensure and Lifegain are good options for kids taking part in sport."

But the situation won't change unless parents take charge, he says. "Moms and dads are responsible for children's physical and emotional health."

"Not his real name."

(Turn over)

USE OF STIMULANTS IS WIDESPREAD

Most schools welcome substance-abuse tests by the SA Institute for Drug-Free Sport (Saidis), says Fahmy Galant, Saidis' manager of stimulant monitoring. "But the responsibility lies with school principals to blow the whistle if they suspect anything."

In terms of a new anti-stimulants programme that kicks off in April, principals now undertake in writing to call in Saidis' help if substance abuse is suspected.

"We invited 122 schools to participate in the programme," Galant says. "Only 50 countrywide agreed to take part. We'll publish the list of names as soon as the programme starts."

Of the four boys Saidis caught out at last year's Craven Week rugby tournament for schoolboys, two were kicked out of the tournament, as was the one who tested positive this year.

Galant says at every hearing Saidis asks where the boys obtained the substances but they don't get straight answers.

"The new programme isn't watertight but it's a good start."

Dr Glenn Hagemann, president of the SA Sports Medicine Association, doesn't believe the Saidis programme alone will solve the problem. "Boys who are caught out should also receive counselling," he says.

In 2011 he led a study that anonymously questioned 10 000 Grade 8-12 boys at 20 KwaZulu-Natal high schools about the use of stimulants.

"About 4,7 per cent admitted to having used illegal steroids; almost 10 per cent of the matrics questioned had tried them."

Up to 60 per cent of respondents who'd used steroids said they used the substances to look good and 30 per cent offered sport as the reason.

"Teenage boys playing rugby were the largest group of steroid users at school level," Dr Hagemann says.

In addition, the study showed a strong link between the use of steroids and the use of other drugs.

Galant emphasises rugby players aren't the only culprits. Saidis publishes a list of banned and permissible substances and the names of rugby players and athletes caught cheating.

Banned substances are also used in other sports, including wrestling, rowing and weightlifting, he says.

YOU NEWS



'We'd be naive to deny it happens right under our noses. It's a problem across the country'

An abscess that resulted from a schoolboy injecting himself with steroids.

(From previous page)

WHAT ARE ANABOLIC STEROIDS?

They're synthetic substances that mimic the effect of testosterone on the body.

Testosterone, known as the male sex hormone – even though it also occurs in women – is the primary hormone responsible for muscle growth.

Dr Henry Kelbrick, a sports medicine ex-

pert of Pretoria, says in some circumstances the use of steroids is permitted, for instance in the treatment of medical problems such as delayed puberty and diseases such as cancer and HIV/Aids which result in loss of lean muscle mass.

In such cases the steroids must be prescribed by a doctor.

It's illegal to use anabolic steroids to build

muscle in order to improve sport or athletic performance.

Anabolic steroids are available in various forms – pills, liquids, injectable mixtures and powders. They're known by various nicknames such as juice, candy, pumpers and stackers.

THE SITUATION AT UNIVERSITIES

Substance abuse occurs at university level too.

Zane Botha, former rugby captain of the University of Pretoria, was recently suspended for two years after he admitted to having used illegal steroids.

Sports doctor Dr Henry Kelbrick says substance abuse at universities operates differently to abuse at schools. "At school the pressure comes from friends, coaches or parents, but at university players do it secretly to gain an advantage."

One of these players says he was secretly grateful when he was caught out and suspended for using steroids "because it relieved me of a huge burden not to have to live with that pressure any more".

Another player from a top university team says the pressure at university level is self-imposed.

"I used steroids because I wanted to achieve," he says. "I would have done anything to be the best. Rugby is very competitive."

"But you keep it secret. You don't discuss it with your teammates. Your coach doesn't know you're doing it."

EXTRA SOURCES: STEROIDREVIEWS.CO.ZA, DRUGABUSE.GOV, NLM.NIH.GOV

WHAT DO SCHOOLS SAY?

Most school principals say they're unaware of the abuse of these substances and would be happy to have players tested. But players can't simply be tested – the Schools Act and Children's Act protect the rights of minors.

"Parents have to give permission first," says Chris Grobler, director of sport at Hoërskool Zwartkop in Pretoria. "Also, these tests are expensive and time-consuming."

"Some kids take a shortcut in their training," he says. "We'd be naive to deny it happens right under our noses – it's a problem that exists at school level right across the country, in urban and in rural areas."

Their school has a sport policy that is signed and endorsed by parents and learners. "If you break the rules you're immediately suspended from all sport."

Wessel du Plessis, head of rugby at Grey College in Bloemfontein, says the school's rugby players know that using

stimulants will ruin their rugby careers.

For the past four years rugby players at Grey used a popular, high-quality nutritional supplement but this year the school cut out all supplements.

"There's no concrete evidence that these supplements work," Du Plessis says.

"We asked Dr Marcel Brüssow, father of Springbok Heinrich Brüssow, to compile a balanced eating plan for our players. He's a medical doctor attached to the sports and exercise medicine division at the University of the Free State."

Hein Kriek, first-team coach at Paul Roos Gymnasium in Stellenbosch, says the school doesn't provide nutritional supplements to its players, nor does it recommend their use.

"If a boy wants to use a supplement he has to provide a letter from his parents, and then we also first make sure that it's a good, clean product."