

The Presidency of the Council of Ministers
Italian National Bioethics Committee

ETHICS, SPORT AND DOPING

25th of March 2010

Abstract

The NBC tackles the issue of doping by synthetically and generally framing it within sports ethics. After a preliminary definition of sport and an outline of the recent social developments of professionalization, the document highlights the fundamental values of this practical activity, identified in the personal commitment to demonstrate the athlete's abilities and the fairness and honesty of the competition. Doping is a disvalue because it alters these conditions: it allows achieving results even in the absence of an active commitment, it introduces an unjust and unfair advantage in the competition, as well as causing harm to the athlete's psychophysical health which also has negative social repercussions. The unacceptability of doping is a shared feeling in society, as it violates the fundamental rules of sport from an individual and a relational point of view, changing the meaning of sport, which becomes a pursue of success in itself.

The Committee examines the arguments of those who are in favour of liberalising doping, in order to verify their strength. However, even those who believe that autonomy is a value to safeguard in sport (at least to avoid the secrecy of this phenomenon, collect reliable epidemiological data, subject the athletes to medical checks when they are using doping substances), do not ethically accept doping, as it would cause "harm to others", leading to doping even those who did not make use of it, in order to avoid being excluded from the competition, increasing healthcare costs for society because of the damage to health that would inevitably arise, making sport meaningless also in the collective imagination.

The Opinion also tackles some specific problems that emerge in relation to pharmacological research with the use of substances that cure illnesses for non-therapeutic purposes, or the use of therapies in the absence of pathologies and cases where the athletes have a genetic constitution that introduces a factor of "natural" advantage in the competition. These are specific matters that are inherent to general bioethical problems regarding health and illness, the improvement and the possible applications of pharmacological research.

The NBC's final hope is for an increase of and an improvement in the control of doping and for a commitment in education, especially aimed at teenagers who are the most vulnerable subjects.