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BMJ Letter:

Response to - World Cup 2014: festival of football or alcohol?

Gornall [1] highlights that ‘intangible benefits’ and ‘lasting legacies’ emerging from major sporting events like the World Cup are seldom clear. Yet, the widespread assumption of many lay individuals, and some government representatives, is that major sporting events represent a form of fairy dust - a panacea - for a nation’s ills. These perceptions are often wholly inadequate given the scale of the problems facing many hosting countries.

Worse, these assumptions may be toxic; they can blind us to the existing risks that are difficult to manage whilst also introducing further risks. The tensions between sponsors - whose products can negatively impact on wellbeing – and organisers need to be balanced against the interests of consumers. Ignoring the complexities of commercial ‘influence’ supports crude and ill-founded approximations about the universal benefits of major sporting events.

Yet there is something virtuous about the power of specific sports. In football, and specifically community-based health interventions, this is clear especially when commercial influence is absent. While health care systems typically struggle to engage ‘at risk’ groups, interventions linked to these football clubs readily engage groups previously abandoned under the label of ‘hard-to-reach’. These interventions have demonstrated statistically significant reductions in alcohol consumption, while increasing physical activity and improving diet [2]. They can also generate clinically significant reductions in weight [3].

Whilst there can be a tangible positive legacy from mega sporting events, the bulk of this benefit must not be felt by – amongst others – the alcohol industry [1]. Mega events certainly have potential for improving health, but at this point, that is all it is, potential. Hard evidence is needed to confirm the lasting positive effects of mega events. In the meantime, we already have persuasive evidence that justifies deploying a bottom-up approach and building on the work undertaken at a community level.

References –

1. Gornall J. World Cup 2014: festival of football or alcohol? *BMJ (Clinical research ed)* 2014;**348**:g3772 doi: 10.1136/bmj.g3772[published Online First: Epub Date]].
2. Pringle A, Zwolinsky S, McKenna J, et al. Health improvement for men and hard-to-engage-men delivered in English Premier League football clubs. *Health education research* 2014;**29**(3):503-20 doi: 10.1093/her/cyu009[published Online First: Epub Date]].
3. Hunt K, Wyke S, Gray CM, et al. A gender-sensitised weight loss and healthy living programme for overweight and obese men delivered by Scottish Premier League football clubs (FFIT): a pragmatic randomised controlled trial. *The Lancet* 2014;**DOI: 10.1016/S0140-6736(13)62420-4**