

## Editorial

### **Mass-gatherings in sport: medicine, leadership and mentorship**

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### **Mass-gathering medicine**

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines a mass gathering as a planned or spontaneous event where the number of people attending could strain the planning and response resources of the community or country hosting the event.<sup>1</sup> The seed for mass-gathering medicine as a specialty was sown in the 2009 Hajj, which was held during the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic.<sup>2,3</sup> Major international sporting events are also mass gatherings that require the planning and delivery of healthcare, not only for the athlete and their team, but also for the attendees and event staff. Typically, the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) is appointed to lead a team of medical officers responsible for the planning, organising, managing and delivery of healthcare. In addition to a strong grasp of sports medicine, medical officers at sporting events

need leadership and organisational skills, some of which are not typically taught at medical schools. Understanding the demands and challenges of the role may strengthen young sports medicine physicians' aspirations to become a CMO in the future.

### **The Chief Medical Officer (CMO)**

The overarching objective of the CMO at a major sporting event is to provide optimal healthcare and safety for the athletes, their team, the event staff and spectators. Specific objectives of the role include:

1. Leadership and coordination
  - Liaising with the relevant multidisciplinary teams involved in the event, including close planning and coordination with local emergency medical services in each of the municipalities in which a competition is planned.
  - Liaising with the local organising committee, and local and national authorities to ensure logistics, appropriate medical services and support, and equipment are readily available.
  - Providing mentorship to the rest of the medical team, which includes providing leadership, skills transfer and education to other members of the medical team and to sport and exercise (SEM) physicians in training.
2. Strategic planning, compliance and regulation, and resource allocation
  - Prior to the event, the CMO leads the medical planning efforts, which involve assessing potential health risks, establishing medical facilities and resources, and training medical personnel.
  - Development of a written medical protocol for preventing and treating injuries and illness, including providing mental health support.
  - Organising a team of medical professionals to cover each of the competitions.
  - Ensuring medical guidelines for sporting events are followed and adhered to.
  - Work with antidoping agencies to facilitate antidoping testing.
3. Ensuring participant health and safety
  - Working with the athletes or team doctors to facilitate the care of the injured or ill athlete. In some cases, facilitating medical care and services for athletes and teams that do not have a doctor.
  - Providing educational content for the prevention of injury and illness prior to the event.
  - Ensuring athlete confidentiality and the safe transfer of medical data.
  - Ensuring injury and illness surveillance is conducted to inform future planning.
4. Communication and public relations
  - Communicating important health-related information to event stakeholders, including athletes, coaches, volunteers and spectators.
  - Provide guidance on hygiene practices, vaccination recommendations and other preventive measures.

### **Leveraging established platforms for skill development and mentorship**

Liaising and communicating with the local organising committee, relevant authorities, other doctors and healthcare professionals, agencies, and other organising committee members is a key function of the CMO. Working with different stakeholders with differing priorities to achieve the same goals, however, can be challenging. This challenge is exacerbated by

language and cultural barriers and potentially being perceived as an authority (as opposed to a facilitator).

Skills to overcome these challenges relate to empathetic listening, communication and effective interpersonal skills. Creating a comfortable environment and information exchange prior to and at the event ensures clear and open communications channels. These skills, however, are generally not obtained through formal medical training and are typically acquired through informal learning—for example, previous experience or interacting with other CMOs—and dedicated mentorship is one way of facilitating skills transfer. The South African Sports Medicine Association (SASMA) is fortunate to have members within the organisation who are global leaders in their respective fields who regularly act as CMOs for major sporting events, most of whom willingly contribute to mentorship programmes to facilitate both clinical and ‘soft’ skills transfer.

### **A need for mass-gathering medicine training in SEM?**

While healthcare guidelines for major sporting events exist<sup>4-6</sup> along with an emerging body of literature on mass-gatherings at sporting events,<sup>2 7-9</sup> the gap in formal medical training for mass-gathering sporting events needs to be addressed. Formal training will better prepare SEM physicians, specifically those in training, to deliver optimal healthcare and safety for athletes and all attending the sporting event. While event medicine forms part of the SEM training curriculum in other countries (eg, the United K),<sup>10</sup> this is not the case in South Africa. As the newly formed College of Sport and Exercise Medicine develop South Africa’s SEM training curriculum, the college should consider including mass-gathering medicine as part of the curriculum.

### **Striving for a global standard of care**

Formalising both the standards and training for sport mass-gathering medical care will complement existing guidelines and skills transfer by informal mentorship. The complexity and importance of medical care in these environments warrants a more structured and uniform approach and will assist in both high-profile professional and community settings.

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