‘Slin is the safest and most anabolic hormone’: Exploring bodybuilders’ use of insulin as a performance and image enhancing drug

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Introduction and Aims: Insulin is one of the ‘anabolic triumvirate’ along with growth hormone (GH) and anabolic-androgenic steroids (AAS). However, unlike GH and AAS, insulin can be immediately life threatening, a fact emphasised in the limited literature on insulin in bodybuilding. This paper describes the first study internationally to examine how bodybuilders understand and minimise the risks of their insulin use.

Method / Approach: A multi-sited online ethnography of insulin use in bodybuilding was conducted, with information collected from YouTube videos and bodybuilding forums, as well as in-depth interviews with 15 bodybuilders who use insulin, including two community experts who pioneered and popularised insulin use in bodybuilding, and who advise other users (with a collective reach of over one million bodybuilders).

Key Findings: Whilst the medical literature emphasises the dangers of insulin use, bodybuilders describe insulin as the safest hormone in their anabolic arsenal, as they suggest that it has no long-term side effects, and short-term risks can be prevented through precise nutrition. Indeed, some describe insulin use as ‘harm minimisation’ as it reduces the dose of AAS necessary for muscular gains.

Discussions and Conclusions: There is currently no evidence that insulin increases muscle mass in healthy adults. However, ‘brosience’ (the experiential knowledge of bodybuilders) has recognised the anabolic effects of drugs decades before mainstream science (e.g. GH and AAS), and insulin may be another instance of this. The results of this study can inform future science, as well as efforts to minimise the risks of insulin use in bodybuilding.

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