‘Bali over the counter’: Exploring overseas use of anabolic-androgenic steroids

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Background

‘Steroid holiday’ or ‘steroid vacation’: travelling to and/or living overseas so as to have greater access to performance and/or image enhancing drugs

Anecdotal evidence suggests that this was a common practice in the bodybuilding and elite athlete communities

- Easier access due to legislative differences
- Warmer climate
- Cheaper standard of living
- Train away from scrutiny
Background

Biological passport: An individual, electronic record for professional athletes, in which profiles of biological markers of doping and results of doping tests are collated over a period of time (World Anti-Doping Agency, 2018)

Whereabouts system: Information provided by a limited number of top elite athletes
()-> Primary residential address, addresses for training, work, other regular activities
()-> Competition schedule
()-> Travel information
()-> Temporary or alternate address
()-> A 60-minute time-slot, between 5am and 11pm each day, where you will be available for testing at a specified location (World Anti-Doping Agency, 2018)

Dorn back - but it’s not the sun, sea, sand or sex for which the resort is famous.

Dorn, 20, from Sydney, is part of a thriving amateur bodybuilding subculture that uses anabolic steroids and growth hormones as a fast-track to the ultimate “ripped” body.

While the drugs are heavily restricted in Australia by laws that are among the strictest in the world, Dorn - and hundreds like him - have discovered a novel way around the problem: they travel to Thailand on “steroid vacations”.

A Fairfax Media investigation has found that rather than risk prosecution in Australia, everyday gym users are travelling to Asia and “stacking” a dangerous cocktail of steroids that include powerful veterinary drugs and fertility medicine.
Issues

1. Is this actually a thing?
   - One case does not make a trend
   - Easy for this to be blown out of proportion by the media due to the hype surrounding Zyzz

2. If it is happening, why is it happening?
   - Why are people doing it?
   - Is it all ‘kids in candy stores’?
   - Members of this community provide a range of advice (to use, not to use) (Tighe et al, 2017)

Aim

To explore the phenomenon of people travelling to and/or living overseas so as to have greater access to performance and/or image enhancing drugs (PIEDs)

Is this actually a thing?
Method

Online search for forums using Google, Bing, and Metacrawler

First ten pages of each browser search results

Australian-based online forums were identified as ideal (acknowledge not always the case)

**Inclusion criteria**: be moderated, have a forum that was regularly used, publically accessible and searchable, be open to PIED use

**Exclusion criteria**: not AU based, largely news based, or predominantly served as product advertisement
Results

- Twelve forums were identified
- Fifty-three threads
- 189 unique avatars (‘forum members’) were included in the analysis
- Two overarching themes:
  1. Product purchasing
  2. Logistics

Theme 1 – Product purchasing

This theme focused on key motivations for considering use overseas

Three main reasons:

1. Perceptions of legality
2. Perceptions of quality
3. Perceptions of sources
Theme 1 – Product purchasing

Perceptions of legality

“Is it legal to possess steroids in Thailand? I know they are easy to get in Thailand but does anyone actually know for sure whether or not it is legal to possess them?”

Perceptions of legality & Perceptions of source

Q: “Whats the deal with Thailand, legal OTC or not? I’ve read conflicting information. Some guys say they are cracking down over there and that they should play it on the safe side and aquire a prescription for a willing doc in the country, other side say it’s a simple as walking into a pharmacy and asking for the particular substance.”

A: “Entering any pharmacy in Thailand to buy gear is a myth. Very few of them carry roids, you will find them nearby gym, boxing clubs and foreigners areas (follow the wxxxxx...). It is NOT legal to buy gear without a prescription in Thailand, but nobody cares (just like prostitution actually, officially illegal as well). Just to let you know.”
Theme 1 – Product purchasing

Perceptions of quality

“Prices are what they are?? Don’t be fooled thinking it’s all legit though, there are many fakes there because they get most of it from China. You need to do your research first via manufacture and make sure the box/labelling/ security code is the same.”

“It’s not hard to source generics if pointed in the right direction... unfortunately there are lots of fakes going around and a Thailand newbie wouldn’t have too much fun lol.. oils and tabs are faked like no tomorrow.”

Theme 2 – Logistics

This theme focused on the ‘how’ and ‘when’ of use

Concerned with:

1. Using in a foreign country
2. Importing back into home country
Theme 2 – Logistics

Using in a foreign country

Conversations often started with enquiring as to how to do this, but most responses questioned why

Q: “Looking for ideas on a 4 week cycle, I am going to be training 4 hours a day 6 times a week...”
A: “you could do dbol but i recon the shin splints will kill your training...”

Thread responses advising against doing a cycle in a short period of time for the type of training being done (MMA)

Importing back into home country

Focus on going over to purchase gear at the source and bring back to Australia

Customs-evading tactics but also advice to not even try

“When I got mine, customs had opened the package and put a letter in there saying that they checked what was inside and that they had no problems with it.”

“I would not try to fly into Australia with gear! Customs are arseholes and it’s a class 5 drug! Same as heroin!”

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Discussion

People engage in more at-risk substance use behaviours when they travel abroad (Bellis et al, 2007; Vivancos et al, 2010; Aresi, Moore & Marta, 2016)

Steroid holidays are a deliberate, planned activity based around a specified outcome and a (somewhat) specified cycle regime

Does lack of impulsivity make it safer?

Or

Kid in candy store?

So what? Access

If ‘steroid holidays’ are a risk, then we need to look at why they are a risk

Problem: Issue surrounding access to substances in Australia due to legislative framework

Solution: Access in countries (legislative differences, easier black market)

Problem: Accessing substances in countries with potentially draconian responses to substance use
So what? Counterfeit

If ‘steroid holidays’ are a risk, then we need to look at why they are a risk

Problem: Counterfeit substances due to black market

Solution: Access in countries (legislative differences, easier black market)

Problem: Health complications

Solution?

Regulated market
⇒ Decriminalised/legalised/prescription for non-health reasons

Use under medical supervision
⇒ Prescribed by training specialist

Medical check-ups to access substances
⇒ Bloods at pre-, mid-, and post-cycle
⇒ Cessation/tapering off if necessary
Thank you!

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