

Improving health through recreational football

For more than 15 years, effective prevention of injuries in professional football has been the top priority of FIFA's Medical Committee and Medical Assessment and Research Centre (F-MARC). Now, having ensured the health and safety of football, they are moving beyond the professional game.

"The 11 for Health" project will explore football's unique potential to improve the health not only of individuals but of communities worldwide. "The project will enable us to deliver health education through football," explained Dr Michel D'Hooghe, chairman of FIFA's Medical Committee, at the end of the third International Football Medicine Conference in Sun City, South Africa.

Lack of fitness is the number one cause of death in our society. A healthy and effective way of preventing this is by playing football. Recent research by the University of Copenhagen (Denmark) and the Swiss Federal Institute has provided scientific proof that playing football for leisure is very effective in preventing disease. After only three weeks of playing recreational football twice a week for 45 minutes, participants in the study revealed significant health benefits, including improved cardio respiratory fitness.

"The 11 for Health" is based on an analysis of the top health risks factors identified by the World Health Organisation (WHO). A pilot study using football as an educational health tool was conducted throughout last year in Khayelitsha, an impoverished settlement outside Cape Town, involving children between the ages of 11 and 15.

In view of the encouraging results, the project was extended to Mauritius and Zimbabwe in January 2010. "If the results are as convincing as the first pilot project, we aim to roll out "The 11 for Health" across Africa and South America from 2011 onwards," said Prof. Jiri Dvorak, FIFA's chief medical officer and F-MARC chairman.

Eleven prominent football players (among them Didier Drogba, Michael Essien, Nompumelelo Nyandeni, Cristiano Ronaldo, Lionel Messi) have each adopted a key health message addressing such important topics as having respect for girls and women, adopting a healthy diet and being diligent about washing one's hands.

Protecting players is the key goal for the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

FIFA's priority is to protect players' health by means of education and prevention. At a special workshop, the team physicians of the 2010 FIFA World Cup participants signed a joint declaration pledging their full support for FIFA's anti-doping strategy, the implementation of the pre-competition medical assessment (PCMA) and "The 11+" warm-up programme to prevent injuries. Since 2006, the FIFA PCMA has been recommended as an effective means of detecting possible underlying cardiac diseases and thus avoiding tragedies such as the death of Marc-Vivien Foe during the FIFA Confederations Cup 2003.

FIFA will be conducting no-advance-notice out-of-competition doping tests (of both blood and urine samples) in training camps from 10 April to 10 June 2010, as well as stringent in-competition tests during the 2010 FIFA World Cup itself. The teams are required to submit their whereabouts to FIFA by 22 March 2010.

"We take the fight against doping very seriously and are committed to continuing it in full compliance with the WADA Code," explained Prof. Dvorak. This is borne out by the facts: more than 33,000 doping controls have been conducted in football over the years, resulting in only 0.03% positive cases.

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