



David Humphries

Sport and exercise medicine

A new specialty

Sport and exercise medicine (SEM) incorporates a diverse range of disciplines. These include: disease and injury prevention, management of medical problems in exercising individuals, management of soft tissue injuries sustained during exercise, and exercise prescription for improving physical fitness and treating disease. Sport and exercise medicine also looks at specific exercise needs of different population groups such as the elderly, those with disabilities and children, as well as medical care of individuals exercising in extreme environments. It covers the medical needs of sporting teams at sporting events and deals with the pharmacological and ethical issues involved in drugs and doping in sport.

Research in SEM is particularly concerned with injury prevention, enhancing physical function, understanding and improving impairment and improving rehabilitation after injury. Like most new specialties, it is patient focused rather than organ focused and emphasises multidisciplinary care. In Australasia, Fellowship is awarded by the Australasian College of Sports Physicians (ACSP). Fellows of the ACSP are known as 'sport and exercise medicine physicians', 'sports physicians' or 'sports medicine physicians'.

The ACSP provided the following description of the SEM physician to the Australian Medical Council during accreditation of the field as a specialty:

'A SEM physician is a specialist medical practitioner who will provide:

- comprehensive skill in addressing the causes, treatment and prevention of injury and medical problems related to physical activity and sport

- knowledge, skill and, where appropriate, leadership in multidisciplinary teams dealing with athletes and exercisers
- expertise in the promotion of health through suitable use of exercise and physical activity
- advice on the safe and effective use of physical activity in the treatment of illness and injury'.

Many SEM physicians provide specialist services to professional sporting teams, state and national sporting organisations, teams and academies and cultural organisations such as the Australian Ballet Company. In addition, government organisations such as the Australian Sports Anti-Doping Agency and the Australian Defence Force also receive input from SEM physicians. Most SEM physicians have specific areas of interest, listed in the 'Find a Sports Physician' section of the ACSP website (see *Resource*).

The ACSP acknowledges that accredited SEM physicians are not the only group with skills in the area of SEM; most sporting injuries are appropriately managed by general practitioners with allied health personnel input as necessary. In addition, some GPs have an extended skill set in SEM. The ACSP seeks to enhance the skills of GPs further by conducting an annual scientific meeting aimed primarily at providing GPs with the opportunity to increase their knowledge in the field. Details of upcoming conferences can be found on the ACSP website (see *Resource*).

Most sporting and activity related injuries are relatively straightforward for GPs to manage. For more complex issues, a SEM physician may be helpful. In some circumstances, formal referral will be appropriate, but much of the time a phone call to a SEM physician may be all that is necessary. Input from a SEM physician may be helpful in the following clinical situations:

- injuries which are not resolving in an appropriate timeframe with suitable care

- complex acute traumatic injuries not obviously requiring surgery
- recurrent injuries or overuse problems
- when the GP is unsure of which investigation is appropriate in a given situation
- cases where the diagnosis is not well established
- complex exercise prescription cases
- injuries in elite athletes where speed to resolution is important
- medical issues in athletes such as exercise induced bronchospasm, runner's diarrhoea, and overtraining syndrome which are not responding to treatment
- drugs in sport issues (these can be particularly complex, and the World Anti-Doping Agency changes their guidelines annually).

The focus articles in this issue of *Australian Family Physician* cover sports related concussion; sporting knee injuries; shin pain in athletes; and sporting ankle injuries. These injuries commonly present to general practice and can usually be managed appropriately by the GP with allied health input. If in doubt, or in the context of the clinical situations listed above, consider consulting a SEM physician.

Resource

Australasian College of Sports Physicians: www.acsp.org.au/.

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