

Performance drugs get special Games attention

The likelihood that people will attempt to bring banned performance-enhancing drugs to Australia has been the subject of detailed planning by Customs.

If such drugs are detected, specific strategies are in place to protect our border and to interact with other Commonwealth, State and international bodies.

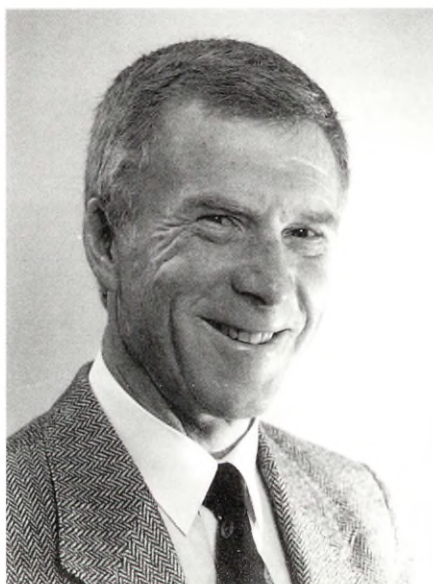
"We've got several thousand officers spread around Australia who will ensure that we maximise apprehension of all substances that could cause a problem for sports people," says Les Jones, National Director, Border Division.

"Where we've needed to improve the education and awareness of our people about what it is they should look for and where they might look for it, we've done it.

"If you look at our record over the past four years on the interception of performance-enhancing drugs, you'll find that it is quite staggering. The reason behind that is two-fold. One reason is the increased awareness of our own people about what it is that they ought to be looking for and where they might find it. The second is that there's undoubtedly been an increase in people attempting to gain access to some of these products because of new market opportunities available through mail-order catalogues and the Internet. We've become quite skilled at being able to identify consignments in which these substances are contained.

"It's really an extension of our skills in finding narcotics, enhanced with both technology and people skills. The more Customs intercepts performance-enhancing drugs, the better we get at it.

"When you start intercepting drugs at the sort of levels that we do, you start to build up pictures of what drug consignments look like and that's where we focus our attention in the context of



Les Jones
National Director, Border Division

subjecting them to our technology. There's not a lot that can get through X-ray scanners without being identified."

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Mr Jones says there is no evidence of large-scale, orchestrated activity to bring in banned sports drugs. The vast majority of these drugs are entering Australia by post, ordered over the Internet by people who, in many cases, may be unaware that they are breaking the law. The fact that drugs are moving through the post raises special issues.

"The differences between Australia Post and other carriers bringing goods into Australia is that other carriers are obliged to report the details of the sender and receiver, the goods, the value and a range of other information while Australia Post doesn't have that information," Mr Jones said.

"Consequently, we work with Australia Post in the physical environment of their mail centres. They give us access to the centres where we use drug detector dogs, X-rays and ion-scanning particle analysers."

But it is not just Australia Post that is combining with Customs in the battle to stop these drugs entering Australia. The Therapeutic Goods Administration has helped to close off some grey areas about the drugs themselves and the Australian Olympic Committee and athletes are contributing as well.

"Athletes and AOC representatives have been to a number of our major workplaces—postal centres, international terminals and the like—to talk to our people about the value of a 'clean games'. They have been able to pass on anecdotal information about drug smuggling that assists our people about where to look for what.

"Because of the nature of the visa system, we know in advance the →

names of sports people visiting in relation to the Olympics and we are able to use our information systems to decide if any are known or potential risks to our border.

"It is not that Customs has a network of countries that give us information about people who use performance-enhancing drugs. In many countries, it's legal to have some of these products in your possession. It's just that any risks of sports-drug importation by members of the Olympic family are, generally speaking, already known to us and sports federations.

"We focus our attention on them if we know they are coming to Australia but, where a person is known internatio-

nally to be using sports-enhancing drugs, it is unlikely that a country would include that person in a team.

"Outside the Olympic family members, we use a combination of both targeting—where you look for people you are aware of that are a threat or risk—as well as profiles," Les said.

When Customs becomes aware of breaches involving sports people, if appropriate it notifies the Australian Sports Commission and the Australian Sports Drug Agency and the Australian Federal Police if a Commonwealth offence has been committed. On Customs success rate so far, Mr Jones was not prepared to speculate on what proportion of imported product was

being caught at the border. "But our seizures over the past few years have been rising incredibly so I am optimistic that we've got the matter reasonably well under control", he said.

"The difficulty for us is that there's a lot of legitimate goods crossing the border that are later diverted into some illicit use. They might be veterinary products that are quite lawfully imported with all the appropriate certifications but they are later diverted and fall into the wrong hands.

"Unfortunately, there's quite a bit of that going on, but I'm pretty optimistic that we're getting a very good proportion of what's arriving at the border."

Not random, targeted

Many people assume that, because of the enormous volume of people and goods entering Australia, Customs can only manage random checks to detect illegal activity. This is far from the truth.

We don't do random checks. Random checks don't produce outcomes," says Les Jones, National Director, Border Division. "All our examinations and interventions are risk-based, which allows us to target our resources more effectively, and to minimise impact on low-risk situations.

"The payoff for industry and the public is that those who are compliant face fewer hassles—they have an incentive for compliance. The pay-off for Customs is less wasted effort and better results."

Mr Jones said there had been a belief in the past that the more you examined, the more you would find. That was not necessarily correct.

"We are most successful by targeting the highest-risk consignments or

people, and then investigating that concern using the best available technology. Our seizures have been increasing every year, so we believe we are on the right track.

"If we believe there's a large volume of cannabis, then the best technology to deploy is a dog. We let the dog tell us whether there's any cannabis in there. You don't need to go to the expense and time and disruption to the importer of unstuffing and repacking the container. If we think there's other drugs we use an ion scanner and back-scatter X-ray.

"As a consequence, we're seeing an increased volume of seizures because of improved technology and better educated officers who are getting more experienced at being able to examine suspect goods very

quickly—thus making for better targeting.

"Technology means the prospects of us having to intervene are getting less and less. We are able to look at what it is we think we need to look at.

"We know that less than two per cent of people represent any threat or risk to the border—immigration, customs, prohibited goods, revenue, quarantine or whatever. The other 98 per cent are genuine tourists or visitors who are here to boost our economy and we want to make sure that they come through the border with a positive experience.

"For cargo, the risk percentage is higher and without targeting you could spend an awful lot of time and effort and money in pursuing the wrong consignments."