

Position Statement

Sexual Abuse/Harassment: Creating a Safe Environment for Competitive Athletes

Competitive athletes dedicate their time, resources, and wellbeing to sport. The hierarchical structure in which they train and compete makes them vulnerable to abuse. Sexual harassment and abuse are violations of human rights that damage individuals and organizations [1]. These behaviors also violate federal law, state law, and guiding instructions from multiple organizations. Athletes are entitled to train, compete and receive medical care in an environment that is free from sexual harassment and abuse. The medical team is often the first line of care for an athlete suffering physical, mental or emotional stress. Recent notorious cases of sexual abuse by sports medicine physicians are egregious examples of the ultimate breach in trust between an athlete and the team physician. Sports medicine physicians should be responsible for identifying and preventing sexual harassment and abuse and for promoting and maintaining a culture of dignity, respect and safety within the sport community and in the training room.

Purpose: To create a culture of responsiveness and to foster a safe environment in which athletes may thrive, The Forum recommends the following principles, to be adopted as a standard for sports medicine providers.

1. The sports medicine practitioner should recognize potential sexual abuse/harassment and provide an immediate and appropriate response.
2. The athletic training room should provide a safe haven for athletes, where discriminatory behavior and sexual abuse/harassment are not tolerated and where athlete confidentiality is respected.
3. A policy for reporting suspected or alleged sexual abuse/harassment should be clearly posted in every athletic training room. This policy must include the reporting of suspected or alleged criminal behavior to a law enforcement agency and provisions to protect athlete safety and confidentiality.
4. Annual education should be mandated for all parties involved in athlete management, including medical personnel, coaches, administrators and other athletes. Education should include recognition of sexual abuse/harassment, Title IX obligations and reporting procedures as well as repercussions for failure to report [2]. This training may be included with existing programs for cultural competency, discrimination, and other programs but must be specific to the athlete.

The Forum calls upon its related sports medicine professional organizations to work together to develop a consensus statement and action plan protecting the competitive athlete from sexual harassment and abuse.

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References

1. IPC Handbook, May 2008, IPC Position Statement on Sexual Harassment and Abuse in Sport, Section 2, Chapter 4.2
2. The Spectrum of Hazing and Peer Sexual Abuse in Sports: A Current Perspective, Aaron S. Jeckell, Elizabeth A. Copenhaver, Alex B. Diamond, 9/7/18, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1941738118797322>