Capitalising on major sporting events

APA Sports Physiotherapist Maria Constantinou is Secretary of the International Federation of Sports Physical Therapy. Here she reports on a panel discussion held at the recent WCPT congress in Amsterdam.
On Tuesday 21 June, World Physical Therapy 2011 delegates representing six different countries from four continents came together in Amsterdam to discuss how major sporting events can be used to promote physiotherapy to the public and the profession. Events discussed included the Sydney 2000, Athens 2004, Beijing 2008 and London 2012 Olympic Games, the Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games, the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games, the Pan Pacific Masters Games and local sporting events such as fun runs and athletics. Important points heard from all the speakers included the role of the sports physiotherapist in such events, and how these events can be used to promote health, convey key messages about safe participation in sports and physical activity, and facilitate a career pathway for physiotherapists.

The panel discussion was hosted and organised by the International Federation of Sports Physical Therapy (IFSPPT) on behalf of the World Physical Therapy 2011 Congress for the World Confederation for Physical Therapy (WCPT). Laetitia Dekker-Bakker from the Netherlands, who is the outgoing IFSPT President, chaired the panel. Her opening address outlined how major sporting events draw the attention of the public not only to elite levels of health and fitness but also to the impact of injury. At such events attention may also be drawn to physiotherapists and their involvement in enabling players/athletes to reach the levels of injury rehabilitation and fitness they need to compete at the elite level. Michael Brennan, Chief Executive Officer of the Canadian Physiotherapy Association (CPA), followed on from Laetitia’s address. Michael discussed the Canadian physiotherapy experience before, during and after the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games. The CPA undertook surveys and ran focus groups prior to the Olympics to understand whom they should address in their media campaign. As part of the media campaign developed by the CPA for the Olympics, a decision was made to participate early by planting physiotherapy stories in the media. Michael quoted that there were about 110 000 000 impressions in the media starting in March 2009, one year before the Olympics, with 26 000 000 impressions being identified during the Olympics. The highlight of their campaign came when Tessa Virtue thanked her physiotherapists on live TV after winning Olympic Gold for Canada for ice dancing.

Lyn Booth, Head of Physical Therapy Services for London 2012 Olympic Games, discussed how the Chartered Society for Physiotherapists (CSP) met with all the clinical groups prior to developing their media campaign to ensure all were involved. The CSP want to ensure the whole physiotherapy profession takes advantage of the London 2012 Olympic Games through the transfer of ideas. With sports physiotherapy at the forefront of the London 2012 Olympics, a rise in career pathway to sports physiotherapy is anticipated. For instance, volunteer physiotherapists for the London 2012 Olympics need to have five years’ clinical experience with the majority being in sports to be accepted.

Ella Yeung, Associate Professor at the Department of Rehabilitation Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, talked about her experience as a physiotherapist working with the China National Women’s Hockey Team at the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. Ella outlined how the Hong Kong physiotherapists contributed to the Beijing 2008 Olympics physiotherapy services as volunteers, leading to the recognition of the sports physiotherapy service by China National Athletics officials and Chinese society at large. This is huge progress for physiotherapy in a culture where traditional Chinese medicine prevails. This recognition of the physiotherapy benefits in sports led to funding and donations for the development of research and services in sports rehabilitation. Further recognition of the physiotherapy benefits in sports was reinforced with Ella’s appointment as the sports medicine specialist to the China Olympic Team for the London 2012 Olympics. Another positive outcome from the involvement of Hong Kong physiotherapists at the Beijing 2008 Olympics was the development of educational courses by physiotherapists for Chinese sports coaches. Furthermore, physiotherapy is now slowly being developed in China with the establishment of new physiotherapy schools in the country.

I was fortunate enough to be invited to participate in the panel discussion. Having worked as a sports physiotherapist at the Sydney 2000 and Athens 2004 Olympic Games, the Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games, and at the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games with the host nation volunteer programs, and with my experience managing postgraduate physiotherapy student clinics at Pan Pacific Masters and Australian University Games, I was able to present an Australian perspective...
on capitalising on major sporting events. I also consulted with the Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) and Mark Brown, the Director of Physiotherapy Services for the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, to be able to present the APA’s strategy and the developed marketing plan for promoting the profession during the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. The marketing plan included, among others, the appointment of dedicated media-trained spokespersons, and providing each volunteer physiotherapist with a brief, a proforma media release and instructions on how to contact media in their local area. In the media releases distributed before and during the Games, attention was drawn to the expertise of physiotherapists in managing musculoskeletal pain and sports injuries. According to Mark, the plan worked very well at the time, with the public becoming much more aware of physiotherapy services. Mark said there were hundreds of media hits all over Australia with approximately 30 TV stories, 50–80 radio interviews and hundreds of newspaper articles in the last few months before the Olympics. During the Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games, in addition to the physiotherapy services in the Polyclinic, Titled Sports Physiotherapists were introduced into visiting teams from various countries that required extra support. As a result, a number of Titled Sports Physiotherapists, including myself, were appointed to work with teams from more than 20 countries. This successful strategy of promoting sports physiotherapy at major sporting events led to some of the countries reappointing their Australian sports physiotherapists to their team for other sporting competitions. In my presentation I included the consideration of other strategies to use for the benefit of the profession and the public, such as:

- engaging the local professional physiotherapy association
- developing a marketing strategy to be used prior, during and after the event
- having allocated media physiotherapy spokesperson(s)
- incorporating various media such as TV, radio, print, website coverage for physiotherapy
- linking physiotherapy with event websites or social media
- providing media segments with practical physiotherapy advice on specific injuries or issues for the public
- using physiotherapy students in supporting roles of physiotherapy services, for instance as athlete medical liaison officers or providing massage services
- developing undergraduate and postgraduate physiotherapy student training clinics under supervision of expert sports physiotherapists.

All these strategies are aimed at increasing awareness of the role of sports physiotherapy in injury management and prevention and of the benefits of safe participation in physical activity and sports. As an outcome of increased exposure of the benefits of sports physiotherapy, it is anticipated more people would seek physiotherapy management, and that enthusiasm for the progression of career pathways in physiotherapy and specifically in sports physiotherapy would develop.

Finally, Edwina O’Malley from Ireland presented the views of a recently graduated physiotherapist in using major sporting events for the benefit of the profession. Only two years postgraduation, Edwina spoke about the use of social media and asking your colleagues to ‘like’ your physiotherapy event Facebook page. Edwina presented her personal experience at local sporting events in Ireland and the significance of new graduates using smaller sporting events and working alongside experienced physiotherapists to gain practice and knowledge in sports physiotherapy. One point Edwina stressed was for young graduates to understand the career pathway in sports physiotherapy and to follow the necessary steps to gain the experience needed to achieve it.

The panel discussion on ‘Capitalising on major sporting events to the benefit of the public and the profession’ was very well attended with several questions being directed to the panel at the conclusion of the presentations. Discussions that continued during and after the session at this large international forum indicated physiotherapists would be able to take quite a few ideas back to their countries on how to capitalise on sporting events to promote physiotherapy to the public and the profession.