For those of us who like to read our newspapers from the back pages first, the endless succession of stories of doping by elite athletes has almost lost the power to shock. The motives of elite athletes for doping are generally easy to understand: fame, fortune and sometimes an overwhelming desire to win. Nothing new there; move on to the next story.

It’s easy to see each new case of doping as the failings of the individual athlete – the bad apple in an otherwise good barrel. Even when a lot of bad apples come from one barrel – the sport of cycling comes most readily to mind – we still see little cause for concern. The spirit of sport as an honest, healthy pursuit is only slightly tarnished. The offenders are punished, removed from competition and the games go on.

Doping is defined in terms of the occurrence of one or more of the eight anti-doping rule violations specified in the World Anti-Doping Code. This includes violations such as the presence of a prohibited substance or its metabolites or markers in an athlete’s bodily specimen; and refusing, or failing without compelling justification, to submit to sample collection after notification; possession of prohibited substances and methods. Doping is not restricted to the use of performance enhancing drugs, it now includes other illicit drugs that are generally not performance enhancing but are potentially a threat to health, or are seen as contrary to sporting values.

The extent to which doping by elite athletes impacts on the behaviour and attitudes of young development and community athletes is a hotly contested issue. To many, elite athletes are role models and thus held to standards that are higher than those expected of other members of society. Policy-makers and
sports administrators generally accept this cause-and-effect model. For example, Richard Ings, former Chief Executive of the Australian Sports Anti-Doping Authority (ASADA), said: “One thing that’s very clear is that what happens at the pinnacle of Australian sport will inevitably filter down to the lowest levels”.

The exact nature of this filtering can be difficult to predict. Many years ago, the revelation that Canadian sprinter Ben Johnson had been using banned substances when he won an Olympic gold medal was initially expected to serve as a deterrent to other athletes. Instead, the Ben Johnson case may have had exactly the opposite effect. Instead of focusing on the fact that Johnson was eventually caught and punished, some noted only that he had won. Winners, it seems, take drugs!

Not surprisingly, young athletes heard this message. Large-scale studies of 12–17-year-old athletes in the USA and France have found that small numbers of athletes, usually between 1 and 5%, are already doping. Many others are aware of friends and teammates who are doping, and already see doping as a necessary step towards having a professional career in sport.

Australian sport has until only recently been considered immune to such problems, and doping by athletes from other countries has typically been met with indignant outrage: our rule-abiding athletes are being denied victories by foreign cheats! Sadly, though, even Australian athletes are doping, and they have been for a long time. A 1997 study of more than 13,000 Australian school children found that about 3% of boys and 1% of girls were using anabolic-androgenic steroids.

Studies of elite Australian athletes have found that while few are caught doping, most athletes and coaches believe that doping is highly prevalent. In one recent study of more than 600 elite athletes and coaches, it was estimated that about 19% of athletes are doping. A survey of more than 2500 members of the Australian public revealed an estimated incidence level of about 26%.

For the past 3 years we have been conducting a tracking study involving a total of 900 elite young athletes aged 12–17 years at the commencement of the study. Each year we would administer a survey asking the athletes for their opinions on a range of doping issues, and also whether they currently doped or planned to dope. We carefully de-
identified the athletes so that they each participated with a specially constructed codename. We then surveyed each athlete three times: once in 2011, again in 2012, and finally in 2013. From this we could track any changes in attitudes and behaviours, with the aim of identifying which athletes might be most at risk of doping.

Just under 4% of the athletes admitted that they were doping. Many of the doping athletes came from sports with histories of doping, including athletics, rugby league and AFL. However, many less obvious sports, including cheerleading, cricket, soccer and touch football, were also represented. Almost half of the doping athletes were in the 12–14 age groups, with three-quarters of them male. Almost 80% of the doping athletes were competing at a regional (inter-city) level of competition.

While there were few demographic differences between dopers and non-dopers, there were several psychological differences. Dopers showed lower levels of moral reasoning and a greater belief that doping was pervasive in their sport and that doping was necessary to winning.

About 90% of the doping athletes were using sports supplements, compared with about one-third of non-doping athletes. Most of the athletes were generally very well-informed about the potential performance benefits of doping, with several athletes vividly describing the performance- and image-enhancing properties of doping, such as the development of “tankness”. The drawbacks of doping were also vividly described, with some extremely graphic depictions of the effects of steroids on the male anatomy.

Only a handful of the athletes had ever completed an anti-doping control test and few believed that junior dopers would be detected.

This research tells us that anti-doping legislation, complete with increasingly severe deterrents and sanctions, has failed to stem the spread of doping beyond a handful of elite adult athletes. Given that increased biological testing of young athletes is both costly and often ineffective, anti-doping interventions are increasingly focusing on the deterrence of doping rather than detection.

The core problem here, though, is that the central message of anti-doping education – that doping is immoral – is being undermined by elite sports. Australian Football League “Player of the Century” Leigh Matthews summed up the impotence of morality as a solution to misconduct by athletes: “If you ask any sportsmen this question, ‘What do you want to be, a squeaky clean loser or a rule-bending winner?’ they’ll choose the latter every time”.

Anti-doping authorities are faced with a serious problem. They cannot reliably detect athletes who are doping, nor can they reliably deter athletes from doping. Some see the solution as self-evident. The war on doping cannot be won, so why bother fighting?

Calls to allow doping, possibly under medical supervision, dominate most popular discussions on the topic. However, allowing adult athletes to dope would create a chemical arms race where the teams with the most skilled (or possibly unscrupulous) doctors and chemists would emerge victorious. The long-term health consequences of such practices are only rarely considered. Doping in developing athletes would still be banned, but the practice would undoubtedly become even more prevalent. Parents and coaches of talented young athletes will come under increasing pressure to supply drugs to younger and younger athletes.

Anti-doping clearly needs a new champion. It may be in the form of superior biological testing systems, but the cheats have always been ahead of the testers, so that looks like an unlikely solution. Then again, it may come through changes in the culture of sport, but in a “whatever it takes” world, that also seems unlikely.

In the absence of a good solution, lesser solutions inevitably arise to fill the void. In Australia the trend is towards criminalising doping, with investigations increasingly coming to resemble police investigations, with legislation supporting the surveillance and interviewing of suspects and witnesses. While this may be effective, such innovations will probably corrupt sport just as effectively as doping.

A totally new science of anti-doping is needed now, or today’s cheats will be the future stars of Australian sport.

Stephen Moston is Associate Professor in Psychology at The University of Canberra. Terry Engelberg is a Research Fellow at Griffith University’s Business School.

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