Benefits of Recreation and Sport

Summary Paper

to support the development of the strategic plan for the Office for Recreation and Sport

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Benefits of Sport and Recreation

Sport and recreation makes a significant contribution in society. The full extent of the benefits are perhaps not fully understood and are often misrepresented, undervalued or exaggerated. This paper seeks to summarise the benefits that have been confirmed through rigorous academic research.

The benefits of sport and recreation can accrue to individuals, local communities and to society and can be categorised under the following broad headings:

1.1 Economic

The sport sector 'per capita' makes a significant contribution to the Australian economy. Sport in general (including for-profit sport activities) accounts for approximately 2% of Gross Domestic Product. The combined value of the sport sector, according to the ABS report, Value of Sport, Australia, 2013 was $12.8 billion.\(^1\)

1.2 Physical Health

Participation in sport, recreation and/or physical activity provides clear benefits in the five Australian national health priorities:

- Cardiovascular disease prevention.
- Diabetes prevention and control.
- Primary prevention of some cancer.
- Injury prevention.
- Promoting mental health.\(^2\)

The health benefits translate into economic impacts for the individual (a healthy person will visit the doctor less frequently) and to society (a healthier population may reduce government health care costs).

Research done by Econtech, commissioned by Medibank Private (2008), stated: “If more Australians were physically active for just 30 minutes a day the Australian healthcare system could save $1.5 billion a year.”\(^3\)

1.3 Mental Health

Regular physical activity has been shown to facilitate better stress management, alleviate depression and anxiety, enhance mood and boost mental alertness. It helps people improve


\(^{3}\text{Medibank (2008), The cost of physical inactivity, Medibank Private, Sydney.}\)
and maintain cognitive abilities into older age, and may prevent the development of dementia and Alzheimer’s disease\(^4\). Even a single dose of low-to-moderate physical exercise can reduce anxiety.

### 1.4 Wellbeing
Participation in sport can contribute to higher levels of self-esteem, motivation and self-worth. It can contribute to the prevention of obesity, relieve symptoms of arthritis and positively influence the immune system\(^5\).

Research also shows taking part in sport, and spectating, have a positive impact on the wellbeing and happiness of individuals\(^6\).

### 1.5 Supporting Education
Studies have identified strong positive effects of physical activity on cognitive functioning and academic ability. Review of the literature relating to the effects of physical activity on cognitive functioning demonstrates that:

- Executive function and brain health underlie academic performance. Basic cognitive functions related to attention and memory facilitate learning, and these functions are enhanced by physical activity and higher aerobic fitness
- Available evidence suggests that mathematics and reading are the academic topics that are most influenced by physical activity. These topics depend on efficient and effective executive function, which has been linked to physical activity and physical fitness\(^7\).

Figure 1 below illustrates how physical activity and sport support education outcomes\(^8\).

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\(^7\) Committee on Physical Activity and Physical Education in the School Environment; Food and Nutrition Board; Institute of Medicine; Kohl HW III, Cook HD, editors. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 2013 Oct 30.

\(^8\) Martin, Dr Karen, 2010. Brain boost: Sport and physical activity enhance children’s learning. School of Population Health, University of Western Australia, pages 4-5.
Sport and recreation also contributes to lifelong learning. For example volunteers such as sports administrators, coaches and officials, develop new skills through training and professional development courses, adding to each volunteer’s body of knowledge\(^9\).

1.6 Preventing At-risk Behaviour

By targeting those at risk of offending, participation in sport provides positive alternatives by creating opportunities to learn new skills, develop confidence, enhance self-esteem and, importantly, to reduce boredom and apathy, both of which can be triggers for at-risk behaviours\(^10\).

1.7 Social Inclusion

Sport and recreation can help bridge gaps in our society in a positive and constructive manner. It provides the catalyst for community gatherings, from small functions to major events, where people play, talk and share experiences. Importantly, it has a positive effect that reaches many levels of our society and is an important thread that ties our social fabric\(^11\).

Community interactions, often facilitated through sport increases social ties, power relations and social capital, social networks, community integration, flow of information and creates a sense of belonging. According to Putnam, places with high levels of social capital

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are safer, better governed and more prosperous, compared to those places with low levels of social capital\textsuperscript{12}.

1.8 Productivity

Research suggests a direct correlation between the health of an individual and their level of productivity. Healthy, fit employees are more likely to be productive, with increased output due to attitude and motivation changes from positive leisure experiences improving their quality of life. According to Treasury, good health is an important factor in labour force participation and productivity. Poor health often leads to early retirement, spells out of work, and lost productivity through sickness or injury. Thirty per cent of 50 to 65 year olds who retire in Australia do so because of illness or disability\textsuperscript{13}.

1.9 Community Safety

Enhancing social cohesion, improving self-esteem, reducing the incidence of violence, delinquency and suicide, and providing a system of social support are additional benefits of sport that was identified in a literature review published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.\textsuperscript{14}

1.10 The Last Word

"The reported benefits of participation in sport and physical recreation have been exhaustively catalogued. A review of literature indicates the consistency of findings, across cultures, of benefits in the areas of childhood and lifelong health; in the areas of learning and academic achievement; in the areas of citizenship and democratic access; and in the areas of leadership and motivation. For example, in physical recreation activities children can learn valuable skills related to quality of life: intra-personal and inter-personal communications, determination, perseverance, confidence, leadership, citizenship, goal-orientation, motivation, and personal satisfaction. Participation has also been given an economic rationale in recent years as failure to provide physical education was significantly more costly, for society and governments, than providing it. In fact, Health Canada estimates that for each $1 invested in physical activity there is long term saving of $11 in health care costs. The benefits are particularly important for children, since physical recreation is crucial to physical, social, motor and emotional development"\textsuperscript{15}


