

# Always look on the bright side...

P McCrory

As I write this Christmas missive, Australia has just defeated England in Perth to win back the Ashes (cricket test series), and the expectation is that the remainder of the series will be a 5–0 whitewash. A nice result, one could say. Now once we get the Rugby World Cup trophy back home where it belongs, the world will return to normal.

I have written before on the effect of sporting success (and failure) both on the national psyche as well as on cardiovascular mortality.<sup>1</sup> Previous studies have demonstrated increased cardiovascular mortality with the outcome of local and national football teams.<sup>2–3</sup> At a local level, male mortality (not female mortality strangely) from myocardial infarction and stroke increased on days when the local professional football team lost at home.<sup>3</sup> This study, carried out in the north of England, followed the fortunes of Newcastle United, Sunderland, Middlesbrough and Leeds United football clubs for 5 years, over which time the findings remained consistent.

Even more striking at a national level was the Dutch study which showed that male mortality in all parts of the country increased on the day of a match where the national team lost an important game against France on a penalty shootout.<sup>2</sup> National team games seem particularly dangerous from the point of view of national mortality: in Switzerland, sudden cardiac deaths increased around the time of the 1998 and 2002 soccer World Cup matches.<sup>4–5</sup> In England, a 25% increase in hospital admissions from cardiovascular causes was noted in the 2 days following the 1998 soccer World Cup penalty shootout between England and Argentina, when the match was decided 4–3 in Argentina's favour.<sup>6</sup>

Readers will be pleased to hear of some groundbreaking research which suggests that Australians seem to be immune from such adverse health effects of watching televised sport.<sup>4</sup> This recent study analysed two stressful sporting events in 2005: the Sydney Swans' appearance in the 2005 Australian Football League (AFL) Grand Final and, just to show that the health benefits of Australian sport are not confined to the local product, Australia's World Cup soccer qualifying match against Uruguay.

The AFL Grand Final between the Sydney Swans and the West Coast Eagles, held on Saturday 24 September 2005, was one of the closest in AFL history. The match was in the balance until the last seconds, when the Swans' defender, Leo Barry, executed the biggest (and goal-saving) mark of his career, giving the Swans their first premiership win in 73 years. The World Cup soccer qualifying match between Australia and Uruguay on Wednesday 16 November 2005 was similarly tense. After a 0–1 loss in Montevideo, Uruguay, the Australian Socceroos, led 1–0 at full-time in Sydney, necessitating a penalty shootout. The successful penalty goal scored by John Aloisi sent Australia to its first World Cup appearance since 1974. Both events had large television audiences.

The cardiovascular stress-induced risks of watching football noted in Europe and elsewhere were not seen among Australian residents in this study.

It does not appear biologically likely that Australian populations are less prone to vascular hypercoagulability and haemodynamic changes (thought to be the mechanism linking major emotional turmoil and thrombogenesis) than European spectators.<sup>7</sup> If stress alone was the key trigger

mechanism in Australia, then the widespread consumption of our national anxiolytic, Fosters beer, should deal with that.

An alternative explanation that holds some promise was recently put forward. A report in the *BMJ* described a newly discovered hypokinetic condition, motivational deficiency disorder, which is characterised by pervasive psychosocial and physical inertia.<sup>8</sup> This condition has only been described to date by Australian scientists but may go part way to explaining this phenomenon.

Another hypothesis that has also been proposed is where the adverse health effects in stressful sporting events seem to be confined to supporters of the losing teams.<sup>4</sup> This concept is supported by similar research in France, where following the French victory in the 1998 soccer World Cup, heart attack rates were, if anything, lower than usual in France.<sup>9</sup>

In the land of Oz we can sit back and enjoy the summer. A 5–0 Ashes whitewash to look forward to and the warm inner glow of knowing that our chance of having a heart attack or stroke while watching the telly are reduced. No worries, mate.

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