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<http://www.vg.no/sport/doping/kronikk-astmamedisin-og-doping/a/23782258/>

Feature article: "Asthma medicine and doping"

I have been following with amazement the debate concerning the use of the asthma drug Ventolin among Norway's elite athletes. A central issue in the debate is whether or not the agencies responsible have offered healthy athletes this asthma drug. The following information may help to refresh the memories of some.

By: Stein A. Evensen, professor of medicine and former head of REC South-East D

In November, 2011, the Regional Committees for medical and health professional research ethics (REC), received an [application](#) from the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, for approval of a research project with the title "Bronchial reactivity and airway inflammation with top athletes in cross-country skiing and biathlon".

The project involved 25 top athletes in both cross-country skiing and biathlon at an altitude training camp where they undertook a series of tests in which three drugs were tested for their effect on bronchial function, one of which was salbutamol (Ventolin). Everyone who attended underwent testing. The participants were informed that these tests were conducted every year in an effort to capture incipient asthma and to be able to start treatment early to prevent the development of asthma.

The REC rejected the application indicating that such investigations were standard practice and thus should be considered as quality assurance. The project did not meet the requirements that are set for research projects and did not include research questions.

The Norwegian School of Sport Sciences appealed the decision, which the REC rejected pointing out that it was considered quality assurance. In its refusal, the REC emphasized that all participants were subject to testing for drugs which were perceived to be for the treatment of patients with asthma, indicating an underlying purpose of the testing was the potential promotion of the athletes' performances.

"The committee believed that the application could be read in such a way that if the drugs appeared to be performance enhancing, this would be taken as evidence afterwards to request a medical diagnosis. Testing medicines on presumably healthy people is ethically challenging, as it is not formulated for any reason other than to enhance performance. The Committee believes this research exposes top athletes to a trial based on vague diagnostic criteria and vague issues. The Committee wishes to have clarified by the School of Sport Sciences which bodies have been involved in the approval of the practice this application describes where drug testing is conducted for all candidates participating in the altitude training camp."

The research group was summoned to meet with the REC where further information of importance emerged. The REC maintained its original decision. In its final decision, the REC added the following:

"The committee concluded that all participants (healthy as well as those with previous evidence of asthma) were routinely exposed to screening in which a total of 3 different drugs were used. It may be questioned whether this type of screening can be ethically and adequately justified. Is the desire to optimize performance more important than the diagnosis condition with asthmatic components? Why is such a high percentage of elite sports persons "affected" by a lung disorder requiring treatment? Why do the project manager and the responsible institution not have more

questions about their own practice if what they do is to facilitate the benefits that could harm participants' lungs in the longer term?"

The further proceedings took a surprising turn. Superior appellate - the National Research Ethics Committee for Medical and Health - imposed on the REC a decision from April 2012 where the REC should consider the project as a research project, but without taking a position on the serious ethical objections the REC had to the project. When the REC re-processed the application the applicant was asked to provide supplementary information.

The request by the REC has remained unanswered. The processing in the REC shows that the Norwegian School of Sports Sciences and Olympiatoppen have pressed on despite very serious warnings.