



Seizures of doping substances at the Swiss Border — a descriptive investigation



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ABSTRACT

This retrospective study evaluates the content, the destination and the source of 960 postal items seized by the Swiss customs authorities at the Swiss border between 2013 and 2014. The packages were seized because they contained at least one prohibited doping product as identified by the Swiss law on encouraging sports and physical activity. A total number of 1825 different doping products were confiscated from these parcels, accounting for an average of 1.9 doping products per seized item. In 74% of the cases, where seizures were made, anabolic androgenic steroids, mostly testosterone esters, were discovered. An obvious trading channel for doping products was identified in this study. The seized compounds were predominately manufactured in Asian countries, but sent to Switzerland mostly via South Eastern Europe countries. Due to the unique collaboration between the Swiss customs authorities and the national anti-doping agency, this study uncovered an alarming trend of illegal doping product trafficked to Switzerland.

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1. Introduction

The legal framework, under which governments around the world formalize anti-doping rules is the UNESCO Convention against doping in sport [1]. Article eight of this convention calls on state parties 'to adopt measures to restrict the availability of prohibited [doping] substances' [1]. Switzerland implemented this article, amongst others, in its law on encouraging sports and physical activity (Sports Law) on October 1st 2012 [2]. Therefore, the Swiss Sports Law now specifically identifies 'heavy' prohibited doping substances and methods, for example androgen anabolic steroids, peptide hormones, or antiestrogens. Other doping substances, according to the World Anti-Doping Agency's (WADA) Prohibited List [3], which are more often used for medical reasons, such as stimulants, glucocorticoids or beta-blockers, are not included in the Sports Law. The Sports Law calls for a close collaboration between custom authorities and the national anti-doping agency (Antidoping Switzerland Foundation, ADCH). The aim of this collaboration is to identify and prosecute importers of

doping products and hence, limit the availability of doping substances in Switzerland, protecting athletes and the population from the misuse of potentially hazardous doping substances. The legally defined collaboration states that all incoming post (parcels, envelopes, etc.), seized because of suspicious doping content, are forwarded to the ADCH for further investigation and destruction. According to the legislation, the import of doping substances is not only prohibited for athletes but, in an effort to restrict availability, for any individual. This is essential because of an increasing use of doping substances, particularly for image enhancing reasons, by recreational athletes and people without any active link to organized sport [4–9]. The use of doping substances has therefore changed from being a problem limited to elite sports to a wider concern for public health [7,10–12].

Switzerland is one of the few countries practicing a close cooperation between public authorities and the national anti-doping agency. But according to article 22.3 of the new World Anti-Doping Code (the Code), governments have to 'encourage cooperation between all of its public services or agencies and Anti-Doping Organizations to timely share information with Anti-Doping Organizations, which would be useful in the fight against doping [...]' [13].

In this study, Swiss seizures of doping products were investigated. The extent of doping trade patterns to Switzerland,

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the nature and sales value of the imported products, and gender specific acquisition preferences were studied. Focusing on such data may help the anti-doping community to understand the early trends of performance and image enhancing drug (PIED) import and use in the general population, and in high risk groups like bodybuilders. Knowing which substances are imported and used helps to adapt anti-doping testing strategies in athletes. Furthermore, another aim of this study was to identify obvious geographical trading channels of doping products.

2. Method

2.1. Inclusion Criteria

For this study, all postal items with a potential doping product content seized by the Swiss customs authorities during the period January 1st 2013 to December 31st 2014 are included.

2.2. Seizure Procedure

The Swiss custom authorities seized incoming packages according to specific custom seizure procedures. The content of the parcel or the envelope was screened for doping substances either using X-ray or by manual/visual inspection. Some dispatchers tried to hide their products in a creative way, so the prohibited products were not always easy to detect by the custom officers. Two examples are shown in Fig. 1.

If a package was found to contain prohibited doping products (meaning that at least one prohibited substance was declared on the product label or the analysis performed by the custom or anti-doping labs demonstrates a positive result), the parcel was then handed over to the ADCH. In the anti-doping lab, the confiscated material is analyzed according to established protocols using chromatographic, mass spectrometric and electrophoretic methods as described elsewhere [14].

If the receiver proved medical or scientific reasons for the import of the doping substances, the ADCH sometimes forward the seized products to the receiver.

2.3. Data Collection

When a seized item from Swiss customs arrived at the ADCH, the attributes of the package were documented in an Excel database and the outer packing and content recorded by camera. Table 1 summarizes the items' attributes defined as study indicators and where they were obtained from.

Some of these study indicators were obtained directly from the parcel or the product label declaration, others needed to be calculated or evaluated. The product price or sales value, for

example is determined by searching in Google 'Buy product name + Manufacturer name'. If the product was found on different websites with different prices, a mean was calculated. Prices varied and changed daily, therefore only a maximum of three different website prices were taken into consideration. For powder or processed products, the values were estimated with the help of underground literature, such as 'Anabole Steroide. Das Schwarze Buch' [15]. The gender was assigned to an importer based on his/her given-name, and the classification of substances into the categories of the World Anti-Doping Agency's Prohibited List is based on the substance name [3].

If the destination of the parcel was outside Switzerland, i.e. transit, the ADCH did not receive the actual parcel, but instead an advanced notice form from the custom office, which included the characteristics of the package.

2.4. Descriptive Data Analysis

Data analysis of the study indicators was performed using an Excel database. Occurrences were calculated for all indicators. Correlation between the contents of the package and the importer's gender were also investigated. The potential worldwide doping trade channels were assessed by linking the manufacturing, dispatching and destination country. The estimated sales value of each doping product was summed up to give an estimate of the total seized value. Finally, scrutiny of the internal ADCH athlete management system and social media was performed in order to obtain information about the importer, for example if there was any active link to organized sport.

3. Results

3.1. Number of Seized Items

In the period of January 1st 2013 to December 31st 2014, a total of 960 postal packages containing 1825 different doping products were seized at the Swiss border. Of these, 506 (53%) parcels were confiscated in 2013 and 454 (47%) in 2014. Breaking down the number of imports into annual quarters shows that 17% of all packages were seized during the 1st (Jan–Mar), 21% during the 2nd (Apr–Jun), 32% during the 3rd (Jul–Sep) and 30% during the 4th (Oct–Dec) quarters of the year. ADCH released 38 packages due to medical reasons. On average, the seized items contained 1.9 different doping products.

3.2. Importer

The 960 doping products were imported by 849 different individuals, 696 (82%) of them were located in Switzerland. In



Fig. 1. Pictures of seizures with concealed doping substances. Left: doping products (Stanozolol, Winaflex) hidden in a flashlight casing. Right: testosterone powder found in a Chinese wall decoration.

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