

Doctors prepare for tight security at Sochi Olympics

Security remains a top concern for Canadian physicians heading to the Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia — but not in the way you might expect.

According Dr. Bob McCormack, chief medical officer for Team Canada, the enormous police presence at Sochi is already something of a “distraction” to athletes and staff. Although the city is “probably going to be the safest place in Russia because there’s going to be very heavy security, my only concern is that it doesn’t become overbearing,” he says.

Fear of attacks complicated preparations for the games, which started Feb. 7. A militant group responsible for two suicide bombings in December, 2013 has threatened a strike on Sochi. Police are also hunting for three other potential suicide bombers in the region.

Some 40 000 police and soldiers will secure the Games — more than any previous winter or summer olympics. The lone road and railway connecting Sochi’s coastal and mountain “villages” are under particular scrutiny.

“You can’t even bring a drink on the train,” says McCormack. Given that even small changes in athletes’ routines or stress levels can make or break their performances, he worries about the toll this and other restrictions will take on those competing.

“It’s something we have to work on with everyone — the athletes and the staff — to make sure they don’t end up losing their focus,” he says.

Meanwhile, it can be a challenge getting athletes to comply with measures to ward off more certain threats, including outbreaks of the flu and traveller’s diarrhea.

“The Olympics is where the viruses of the world come to meet,” says McCormack. “We’ve had the experience in the past where 20% would arrive to the Games sick or injured, and clearly you can’t perform at your best.”

He cites Norway’s poor performance at the Torino 2006 Winter Olympics as a case in point. “They came 13th in the medal count because they had a number of athletes who were sick,” he explains. “Going into the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics, they reduced the number of illnesses by 50% and came 4th in the medal count.”

However, “athletes being young and thinking they’re invincible, they don’t always understand the importance of basic things like immunizations, good hygiene, adequate rest and proper nutrition,” he adds.

According to Dr. Connie Lebrun,



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chief doctor for Team Canada, there are still athletes who “won’t get vaccinated ... for the same reasons why parents don’t want to vaccinate their kids.”

“Teams that have ongoing, good relationships with physicians in the four years [preceding the Games] tend to be more compliant, whereas those scattered all over the country without a family doctor or team physician looking after them are less informed,” she adds.

Medical staff are also facing tighter restrictions on the drugs and equipment they may bring with them, increasing their dependence on local hospitals. These include bans on importing narcotic painkillers, such as Tylenol No. 3, and some medicinal sleep aids.

“We try to be as self-sufficient as possible, but we’re not going to have as much access to some of the things we’re used to having,” says Lebrun.

Further complicating the situation, physicians who have visited local health services have had “trouble finding English-speaking people to help them.”

The Sochi 2014 Winter Olympic ran from Feb. 7 to Feb. 23. Canada sent 221 athletes to compete in Sochi — its largest team ever for a Winter Games. — Lauren Vogel, *CMAJ*

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