

2010 Games research to give insight into public health

BY JEFF LEE, VANCOUVER SUN MAY 28, 2009



Freestyle skier Alexandre Bilodeau is one Canadian athlete preparing for the 2010 Games, but the Games aren't only about the athletes. More than 90 institution-based scientists hope to map out at least half a dozen research projects they want to conduct around the Games.

Photograph by: Marit Hommedal, Reuters, Vancouver Sun

VANCOUVER - Public health researchers are hoping the 2010 Olympics will give them valuable insight into the effect a mega-event like the Vancouver Games can have on a population.

Whether it's a communicable disease like the H1N1 flu, the pressure on a hospital system of a mass-casualty accident or the prolonged effects of traffic-related air pollution, events like the Olympics can dramatically affect public health.

Until now, researchers largely haven't developed ideas of how to use the Vancouver Games to scientifically explore those effects.

On Friday, however, more than 90 institution-based scientists hope to map out at least half a dozen research projects they want to conduct around the 2010 Games.

The potential projects will be discussed in a symposium organized by the B.C. Environmental and

Occupational Health Research Network.

Tim Takaro, a health sciences researcher at Simon Fraser University and workshop coordinator, said the network will award half a dozen seed grants of about \$10,000 each for a variety of Olympic-related projects.

Health research around the Olympics isn't a new concept, and some major events like the 1996 Atlanta and 2008 Beijing Summer Games are still being studied.

At the conference, new findings will be presented on air pollution studies in Beijing and reduced respiratory problems during the Atlanta Games as a result of traffic restrictions.

With several hundred visitors expected to be in Vancouver, the Olympics provides a rare study opportunity, Takara said.

"There's an opportunity to look at the social phenomenon, the infections disease phenomenon, flu, air pollution and the effects of travel, as well as the effects of restricting travel," he said.

"All of those things are natural experiments that pertain to public health because they relate to exposures."

Most of the research involve will involve studies conducted before, during and after the Games, he said. Some, like an examination of air quality, could take upwards of a year after the Games to be completed.

Ultimately the findings will all be given to universities, governments and the International Olympic Committee.

"I would hope what will come from this is to help cities plan traffic-free zones, for example, or plan better where to site schools, businesses and residences," Takara said.

"I am hoping it contributes to the province's ability to track infectious disease, to prepare for the next pandemic, or to plan for surge capacity in hospital emergency rooms."

The network was set up in 2005 with a large grant from the Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research.

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