

Go with the Flow Workshop – University of Stirling

The UK Menstruation Research Network hosted the Go with the Flow workshop on Sport and Menstrual Health on Friday 7th and Saturday 8th February 2020. The event was hosted by Dr Sarah Zipp at the Faculty of Health Science and Sport, University of Stirling and funded by the Wellcome Trust Foundation.

The key aims of the workshop were to explore how menstruation and menstrual health education impacts on engagement in sport, physical activity and physical education. Participants presented their research and advocacy on these three central topics:

- (1) How menstrual health impacts the experience of sport and physical activity from adolescence through menopause, examining all levels of participation from recreational to elite performance;
- (2) How sport might serve as a platform for menstrual health education and raising awareness of key issues, such as period poverty and reproductive health;
- (3) Building partnerships with stakeholders in sport, health and education to exchange knowledge and support impactful research.

Workshop participants

A wide variety of researchers, coaches and activists gathered to share their insights on scholarship and practice. Over 60 participants attended, including presenters from across the UK, Europe and India. Groups of coaches from a variety of sports and competition levels attended along with representatives from the performance sport institutes of all four home nations. Several charities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social enterprise organisations presented their work. Participants from the following groups attended and/or presented their work:

- Sport organisations: English, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland Institutes of Sport, Scottish Swimming, Scottish FA, Scottish Cycling, Scottish Canoe Association, Scottish Royal Yachting Association, Active Stirling, Edinburgh Triathlon, various community sport clubs.
- NGO – Menopause Café (Scotland), Naandi Foundation (India), International Working Group of Women in Sport (IWG) (Switzerland/New Zealand), Women's Adventure Expo (UK), Scottish Sports Futures (Scotland), National Organisation of Women in Sport, Physical Activity and Recreation (NOWSPAR).
- Corporate/Social enterprise – Hey Girls (social enterprise in Scotland), Orecco sport consultancy firm (UK).
- Universities and education institutes across the UK.

Many remarked that this was the first event on menstrual health and sport that they had ever attended or heard of. We are unaware of any other event in the UK on the topic of menstruation and sport. Coaches noted that menstrual health education is not included in coaches' education and that they felt it was a barrier to engage with their athletes who menstruate. In particular, the male coaches felt ill-equipped to open discussions on menstrual health with their athletes, but wanted to learn about strategies to better support menstruating athletes.

Coaches, club and association representatives and sport institute representatives agreed that support for menstrual health education in sport should be improved and that more resources are needed (e.g. education tools, menstrual products, etc.). Participants also felt more research was needed to understand the experiences of menstruation and sport, particularly for adolescent girls who tend to drop out of sport in early puberty.

Participants from third sector organisations and social enterprises presented on their initiatives and made plans for future collaboration. Scottish organisations such as Hey Girls and the Menopause Café noted that government efforts on menstrual product provision have created a supportive environment for menstrual health in Scotland. Presenters from the Naandi Foundation (India), IWG (Switzerland/New Zealand) and NOWSPAR (Zambia) noted the specific challenges of menstrual health and sport in the Global South.

In order to meet the needs of sport participants and coaches, more collaboration is needed across the sport landscape. Including research from universities, funding support from government (e.g. local councils, parliamentary committees, ministries, etc.) and resources from sport associations and governing bodies (e.g. national governing bodies of sport, institutes for sport, etc.). Many of the organisations present are non-profit groups that are working to raise awareness on menstruation and sport to generate more opportunities for grant funding and other resources.

This workshop was the final of three workshops during the academic year for the UK Menstruation Research Network, a Wellcome Trust funded research group of researchers and activists across the UK (£27,160).

Keynote Speaker

Dr Georgie Bruinvels is a Research Associate at [St Mary's University](#), a Research Scientist for the sport science consultancy firm [Orreco](#) and an elite endurance athlete. Her research focuses on how hormonal fluctuations throughout the menstrual cycle impact athlete training and performance. Her clients include the USA women's soccer/football team. Dr Bruinvels provided [key consultancy on menstrual health](#) for the team's triumphant campaign to win the 2019 Football World Cup. She has also worked at the UK Anti-Doping office. Dr Bruinvels was named to the list of [Sport Women of the Year 2019](#) by the Telegraph. Her article in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 'Sport exercise and the menstrual cycle: where is the research?' (Bruinvels, et. al, 2017) is a seminal work on menstruation and sport.

At the workshop, Dr Bruinvels shared her research insights and discussed practical applications of menstrual health research in sport.

Dr Emma Ross, the (former) Head of Physiology at the English Institute of Sport (EIS) was also scheduled to deliver a keynote address. However, she was unable to attend in person and her work on the SmartHer campaign was presented by Dr Zipp. SmartHer is a programme designed to support athletes, coaches and sport managers in understanding menstrual health and broader issues of women's health.

Outcomes

Following the workshop, several key outcomes were achieved. Namely, collaborative projects and applications were launched, research projects initiated and published, and participation in related events followed. However, shortly after the workshop the Covid-19 pandemic emerged and many plans for work were delayed or disrupted. Despite these challenges, workshop participants took part in these notable outcomes:

- The UK Menstruation Research Network received additional funding support from the Wellcome Trust Foundation for future research and workshops.
- Research publication by participants, including this article by participants [Dr Natalie Brown](#) and [Dr Laura Forrest](#):
Brown, N. Knight, C.J. & Forrest, L.J. (2020). Elite female athletes' experiences and perceptions of the menstrual cycle on training and sport performance. *Scan J Sports Med & Sci*, 00, 1-18.
- Research project collaboration between University of Stirling (Dr Sarah Zipp) and Scottish Swimming (Alan Lynn).
- Various coaches have now incorporated menstrual health into their work. During lockdown, at least one coach (swimming) included menstrual health education as a video training session.
- Participants Dr Emma Ross, Dr Sarah Zipp and Dr Bee Hughes were included in the Irise International [One World Period](#) event for Menstrual Hygiene Management day on May 28th, 2020.
- Participants Dr Camilla Rostvik, Dr Kay Standing, Dr Bee Hughes and Dr Sarah Zipp presented at the British Academy conference on menstruation in experiences in the Global North and Global South (October 2021).
- Various events, media publications and public engagement activities from participants followed. Namely; [Why we know so little about how exercise affects women's bodies](#) (Times article with Dr Georgie Bruinvels), [Training and the menstrual cycle](#) (Gripped article with Dr Natalie Brown), [India cricket Rajsathan Royals let's talk periods campaign](#) (The Nation article with Dr Sarah Zipp).

Our network and collaborative partnerships continue to produce research, education resources and other efforts on menstrual health in sport and physical activity.

Are you interested in research, advocacy or education on menstrual health in sport and physical activity? Send us your questions or comments here.

