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NEWS RELEASE

UP's SEMLI launches research study on returning to sport after COVID-19

PRETORIA – A study on the effects of COVID-19 and other respiratory infections on athletes returning to training and competition is being launched by The Sport, Exercise Medicine and Lifestyle Institute (SEMLI) at the University of Pretoria (UP) in association with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Research Centre of South Africa.

The **A**thletes **W**ith **A**cute **R**espiratory **I**nfection (**AWARE**) research study will be done in collaboration with local academic institutions (South African Medical Research Council, Stellenbosch University and University of the Witwatersrand), international academic institutions as well as sports organisations such as the IOC, FIFA and World Rugby, among others.

“Since the first case of the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) was described in late 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has added an unparalleled and extraordinary threat to the health of all people, including recreational and professional athletes around the world,” says Professor Martin Schwellnus, director of SEMLI.

About 50% of all acute illness in athletes during competitions and tournaments affect the respiratory tract, he explains. Some acute respiratory infections, such as COVID-19, negatively affect multiple organs in the body, which can cause a drop in exercise performance and increase the risk of medical complications occurring during exercise.

As lockdown restrictions are gradually lifted, the SEMLI community is being called on to urgently advise and guide organisations and individual athletes on how they can safely return to sports training and competitions following a COVID-19 infection.

“The current return-to-play guidelines for athletes are an adaptation of a clinical tool known as the ‘neck check’, where the decision to exercise or not is based on symptoms and signs being either localised (above the neck) or systemic (below the neck),” explains Prof Schwellnus. “But limited research data supports its use, and the use of this tool to guide return-to-play following COVID-19 has been questioned.”

There is increasing evidence that the virus can affect multiple organs including the lungs, kidneys and heart, and increases the risk of blood clot formation. There might also be neurological symptoms and potential negative effects on skeletal muscle. There is, however, no data that determines whether the negative effects on organs are exacerbated in athletes as they return to full training and competition.

“Such residual symptoms might not affect only sports performance but could increase the risk of medical complications occurring during high-intensity exercise,” Prof Schwellnus says. “The decision as to when it is safe for an athlete with recent or current symptoms of an acute respiratory infection can return to exercise remains one of the most challenging clinical decisions for a sport and exercise medicine physician or health professional involved in the management of athletes.”

The AWARE research study aims to answer these questions by tracking the symptoms and recovery of athletes after they have experienced a recent acute respiratory infection, including COVID-19. This will allow guidelines to be established that health professionals around the world can use to advise competitive and recreational athletes as they return to sport after COVID-19 or some other respiratory infection.

SEMLI is inviting athletes who compete at all levels and in different sports to be part of this important research, including:

- elite/professional, competitive and recreational athletes (those participating in community-based sports events, and who regularly train a minimum of 3 hours per week or under the guidance of a coach), with or without disability
- athletes between 18 and 60 years of age
- athletes who have had any symptoms of a respiratory infection (any flu-like illness including COVID-19) in the past six months, such as a sore throat, blocked or runny nose, cough, loss of smell or taste, difficulty breathing, chest pain, fever or chills, excessive tiredness or unexplained general muscle/body pain, or
- who have had a COVID-19 test in the past six months (with or without symptoms).

Participants will be asked to complete an online questionnaire about their history of symptoms that are suggestive of a recent acute respiratory infection, including COVID-19.

For more information about the study and how to become involved, contact: aware_covid@semli.co.za.

The current list of collaborators in the AWARE study are:

- International Olympic Committee (IOC)
- Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA)
- World Rugby
- IRONMAN Argentina
- University of Melbourne
- Copenhagen University Hospital
- South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC), Biostatistics Unit
- Institute of Sport and Exercise Medicine (ISEM), University of Stellenbosch
- Wits Institute for Sport and Health (WISH), University of Witwatersrand
- SA Rugby
- South African Sports Medicine Association (SASMA)

-Ends-

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on the Hatfield Campus, Pretoria. This 112-year-old institution is also the largest producer of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country that has a Faculty of Veterinary Science which is ranked top in Africa, and overall has 120 academic departments, as well as 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 55 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes.

UP is one of the top five universities in South Africa, according to the 2019-2020 rankings by the Center for World University Rankings. It is also ranked among the top 100 universities worldwide in three fields of study (veterinary science, theology and law), and among the top 1% in eight fields of study (agricultural sciences, clinical medicine, engineering, environment/ecology, immunology, microbiology, plant and animal sciences and social sciences).

In June 2019, the annual UK Financial Times Executive Education Rankings once again ranked GIBS as the top South African and African business school. The University also has an extensive community engagement programme with approximately 33 000 students involved in community upliftment. Furthermore, UP is building considerable capacities and strengths for the Fourth Industrial Revolution by preparing students for the world beyond university and offering work-readiness and entrepreneurship training to its students.

As one of South Africa's research-intensive universities, UP launched the *Future Africa Campus* in March 2019 as a hub for inter- and transdisciplinary research networks within UP and the global research community to maximise 4IR innovation and address the challenges and stresses our continent and world is facing. In addition, UP also launched the Javett Art Centre in September 2019 as a driver of transdisciplinary research development between the Humanities and other faculties. In 2020 UP will launch Engineering 4.0. as a hub not only for Smart Cities and Transport, but also to link the vast resources in technology and data sciences to other faculties via Future Africa. These initiatives are stimulating new thinking at the frontier of 'science for transformation'.

For more information, go to www.up.ac.za