

Diagnosing the SICkness in ForenSICs: Prescriptions for Wellness

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It was August of 1988; I was a relatively new program director attending the first National Developmental Conference on Individual Events. I had come to learn from professional educators how to create a successful program. I wanted to know how to craft successful debaters and national championship speakers. Imagine my surprise to hear of a paper by Hatfield, Hatfield, and Carver in tournament practices on wellness in forensics. This was not what I had hoped to hear from these successful coaches. I was quick to lament with the other conferees, "What is this 'banana bread' paper?" I was also among the group who scoffed at the granola served between rounds the following year at the AFA-NIET hosted by North Dakota State University. Such wellness nonsense! I had more important things to do to make my program competitive and successful. And so for nearly a decade, I put the notion of wellness in forensics out of my head, and continued building what today I believe is a successful program. That was until SCA of 1996 when by some fluke I was a respondent to a panel on wellness in forensics. The papers had arrived just hours prior to the convention, but I was shocked to read the reality of this activity on the human body as I devoured the Leland (1996) paper. His narrative presentation was even more startling, as I realized that forensics had just lost another great coach to the ranks of college administration. But then I learned why. He, like the majority of those conferees, had dismissed any notion of wellness from their programs. The issue of wellness had once again been raised, and this time, it was not to be ignored. The past several years have brought a new, albeit tardy, interest in wellness. In this day and age of assessment-mania it's time to assess the wellness of the activity we hold so dear. This essay seeks to answer the following questions: (1) Are we well as an activity? (2) Are we well people?

By most standards, the first question is quickly and easily answered with a resounding "yes." The number of forensics programs nationally has remained relatively constant. Our national tournaments are hallmarks of excellence, each individual events tournament typically attended by over 100 schools. Debate has forged a new cooperative ground. New forensic activities are burgeoning which participants never envisioned a decade ago. The quality of our debates and research are astoundingly high. Our interpers have pushed envelopes over never dreamed of in the realm of black bookdom and we've squeezed 22 citations into a winning extemp speech. We've moved from small budget, single coach programs to ones that travel nationally, even internationally, and we've created more national tournaments than we can fit into two month's of weekends. Indeed, the quality of our activity is high. What we've created is good, and we need to step back for a moment of pride. But, as critical thinkers always striving to improve, we must ask at what price we've accomplished all this competitive excellence.

And therein lies the answer to the second question. Can we truly declare

our activity healthy given the state of the health of the individual participants? Indeed, our activity is only as healthy as the people who participate in it are, so an assessment of our individual health is clearly warranted. To return to that question, are we well people? Leland (1996) answers with a resounding "no!" As he examined the typical tournament lifestyle from the perspective of a director, he recounted its detrimental impacts on daily health. Indeed while his focus was only on coaches, the poor health habits are not limited to forensics educators, but trickle down to our students. Weeks of catching up, too little sleep, intense competition, extensive travel, poor diet and little exercise become the pattern for entire seasons. Before long, these seasons tally up to become lifetimes. Is it any wonder that of those 70 forensic educators who attended that developmental conference in 1986, only 15 of them are still active coaches today? Before we can become too content with the forensics activity we've created, it's time to account for what wellness sacrifices have been made to create this activity which we're so proud of.

Causes of "Unwellness"

As have been assessed elsewhere, the costs have been high. Leland (1996) provides a frightening look at the toll forensics takes on physical health over time. Jones (1997) and Burnett and Olson (1998) have documented the impact forensics has on creating and maintaining healthy relationships. It's no secret that career health also is suffering as fewer and fewer forensic educators are in regular faculty positions with terminal degrees advocating the activity from a clear communication discipline perspective. Many a forensic educator has sacrificed a successful academic career and the security tenure offers for a chance at the brass ring of competitive forensic success. And the toll on psychological health, given the amount of stress, exhaustion, etc. which occurs in the activity is incapable of being accurately measured. Given the high intelligence level of the participants in this activity, we can only hypothesize why these unhealthy practices have become institutionalized.

In a word, competition. The dominant framework forensics educators use to make nearly all decisions involving their programs is how it will advance their team competitively. In both debate and individual events we've defied the sage advice from many an interp ballot that "less is more," and we've created a community that thrives on competition excess. The end result is that we've created an activity that defies what our medical doctors, insurance companies, even best friends and relatives tell us, "We all just work too hard." In essence, we've become addicted to the thrill of competition. Most forensic participants, myself included, have thrived on the pressure to succeed, to heavily invest in this worthwhile activity. The friendships we make, the personal rewards we feel from watching students' progress, and the fun of living life on the edge, traveling to new places, all make this activity unparalleled. Yet, over the years, it takes its toll on our overall health. Given our enthusiasm, it's easy to see why our students share our addiction. We run ourselves ragged from September to April in

our effort to provide every competitive advantage to our students. Yet in retrospect, our expectations for students to quality as many events for nationals as possible translates into a heavy travel burden for them, even when many report they'd be happier with fewer opportunities and are happy to "take their chances" at fewer tournaments. So, as an activity, it's easy for all participants to get caught up in the excitement of the competition. The chief culprits of this intensely competitive and unwell activity are tradition; the length of the season; swing tournaments; and tournament length and rigor.

The advantages and disadvantages of substantial change in any one of these areas have already been significantly debated. While people agree with the problems, solutions are typically met with a "yes, but . . ." attitude. Yes, there's a problem, but no, I can't change my schedule, tournament, etc. We tend to believe that a hands off policy of "letting each individual director decide" what's best for his/her program is optimal given the different foci and resources of programs. However, many times these choices are constrained, indeed circumscribed by a number of factors. Tradition plays a significant role in many forensic decisions. As directors, we want the activity to stay like it is because this is all we've ever known, hence because we enjoy it, and we created it, it must be good. Often, we can predict our travel schedule years in advance as we hesitate to break with tradition. And today, many of the policy-makers and leaders of our various forensic organizations are not themselves active coaches. While many once were, the immediate impact of the day- to- day routine of a forensics program is not as present for many of our decision-makers. So it's easy for wellness issues to escape the forefront of their decision-making.

Several reasons account for the length of the season. Initially, there seems to be a sense of obligation that every program hosts a tournament; and/or tournament revenue is a significant means of financing a respective program. So, in order to squeeze in all these tournaments, the season lasts for nearly seven months. Within some regional areas, directors fear alienating any host by their lack of personal attendance, so directors attend tournaments even when it is not essential, just to allay the fears of their colleagues. And while the law of supply and demand does dictate which tournaments thrive and which disappear into oblivion, the overwhelming reason people choose to continue with their current patterns is to be competitively successful.

Perhaps some data will counter these assumptions. Based on a voluntary study done by AFA-NIET District IX during the 1997-98 season, teams shortened their travel season by approximately 3 weeks at the beginning of the year, not traveling or accruing qualifying legs for the AFA-NIET until the second weekend in October. A cursory comparison of the results at the national tournament documents that the success rate of these teams actually improved at the national tournaments. Two independent measures confirm this conclusion. Initially, the number of NIET at-large slots qualified actually increased from 89 in 1996-97 to 102 in 1997-98, nearly a 15% increase. The total number of slots also indicates that shortening the season did not hamper actual attendance at the tournament, for the district sent 122 slots in 1997 while increasing that to 134 in

1998, a 10% increase despite a much smaller district qualifying tournament. Success rate of these slots also improved with 25 slots in elimination rounds in 1997 and 44 in 1998. The final measure could be number of national champions: 1 in 1997 and 5 in 1998. While these results are limited in scope, they do suggest that a shorter season can actually improve competitive results, perhaps due to the fresher nature of performances.

The wisdom of swing tournaments has long been questioned educationally since students have little opportunity between tournaments to respond to the feedback from their first ballots. Since more and more swing tournaments are being hosted on a single campus, providing a varied experience from one tournament to another is limited. Dickmeyer and Schnoor (1997) found a dramatic increase in swing tournaments during the past decade. In 1986-87 only 3 swings existed for individual events, in 1990-91 it had risen to four, compared to 34 swings in 1997-98. While providing more competition with less travel, these tournaments often try to compact 2 tournaments into the time period when previously just one existed. Often swing participants can become exhausted from the long days, minimal down time, and hectic schedule. And when the bulk of one's season consists of swing tournaments, the pressure mounts.

Again, more is thought to be better which accounts for the long duration of tournament days and their rigorous schedules. It is not uncommon for tournaments to last 14 to 15 hours for consecutive days. Many tournaments offer short meal breaks, if any, and participants are frequently not well rested due to travel fatigue, poor and irregular meals adding to the already stressful competitive tournament environment. Often, tournament directors try to squeeze in as many rounds as possible to provide ample competitive opportunities to justify high travel costs. However, data has already shown that the final results of fewer rounds are not appreciably different. Gass and Congalton (1991) found that there were not statistically different results when counting 2 versus 3 preliminary rounds in individual events. And Brusckke and Whalen (1991) found the same results when comparing a 6 versus 8 round debate tournament. While this could be construed as an argument for an increased number of swing tournaments, perhaps it is a more compelling argument for shortening our tournament day to create a more humane schedule, allowing for reasonable breaks for meals, etc. and finishing earlier in the day to promote healthy sleep patterns. It is easy to see why a myriad of reasons have contributed to an activity that compromises the health of its participants.

A Changed Mindset

Until directors adopt a wellness perspective into their decision-making, little is likely to change in contemporary forensic practices. Initially, it is perhaps only truthful to admit that past decisions have been made looking solely through a competitive lens. Today, directors must start relegating that lens to a secondary position, and begin by examining all decisions through a wellness lens. Asking a few basic questions, such as "Will this competitive experience be

healthy for me?" may seem like a selfish thing to do at first, but only if forensic educators are willing to examine the impact their decisions have first on themselves will they be able to see what impact their decisions will have on the wellness of others. Toward this end, three specific steps must be taken to integrate wellness into contemporary forensic practice.

1. Directors must be role models for wellness. It is a commonly accepted fact that students look to their coaches for more than coaching advice. Indeed, forensic educators are often among the most influential role models students have during their collegiate years. As Dickmeyer and Schnoor (1997) documented, directors from the top 20 AFA-NIET programs sent their students to an average of 23 tournaments per year, while averaging 15.75 tournaments themselves. These travel patterns are despite their belief that the average number of tournaments students need to attend to be successful at nationals is 9! Their study was even more frightening when analyzing the abbreviated time span in which these tournaments occur. A month-by-month analysis shows that contestants in these programs typically travel every non-holiday weekend between September and April. Certainly these statistics are alarming and belittles the notion that directors know what's best for their programs. Indeed, forensics has perpetuated an unhealthy environment for generations. Being raised in an unhealthy activity it's easy to see why forensic educators perpetuate the current practices: they're successful and it's the only way we all know. Few have deviated from these extensive travel patterns or "unwell" behaviors. It's time for us to become "healthy" positive role models, by looking first at ourselves and the choices we make on a daily basis. From this follows:

2. Small steps are not enough. Given the severity of the problem, minor changes will not exact the magnitude of results necessary. For as wellness guru Ardell (1994) pointed out in Leland, in order to afford high wellness, change must be integrated into each facet of life. Likewise, the forensic activity has a long way to go to integrate wellness into its collective lifestyle. While choosing not to attend a regular and close tournament one season, I phoned the tournament director to explain that the tournament schedule was not healthy and requested he make some changes in it. His response to my pleas for wellness was that instead of shortening a 17-hour day, they'd decided to serve pizza to the contestants after one round. While arguably the easiest of the wellness problems to fix, a slight modification in the tournament schedule to allow students pizza could hardly be construed as promoting wellness. As Carver (1997) documents in her organizational view of wellness, grass roots movements toward wellness will fail. Allen (1987) documents that a major and all encompassing effort is necessary to integrate wellness into a community. And to be honest, these may prove to be financially expensive changes. For so long, forensic coaches have scrimped and saved to insure maximum travel opportunities for students. Perhaps other concerns related to wellness, those which may cost more: an extra night in a hotel, an extra day of travel, a room to oneself, can be seen as fostering both safety and wellness and can change the way we make decisions.

3. National organizations must make policy actions that embrace wellness.

As Carver (1997) again documents, a top down approach is all that will be successful. For too long, our national bodies have been reluctant to make bold statements to embrace wellness and have even discouraged grass roots movements to experiment with policies which may produce some lasting wellness results. Early discussions of wellness policies focused largely on guidelines, which became initiatives. These lukewarm efforts do not address the importance of integrating wellness into the forensic community and could be construed as just paying lip service to advocates who believe in the importance of wellness. While any policy changes will likely disadvantage the immediate competitive success of some programs/individuals, the likely long term returns in improved health and wellness are likely to far outweigh the experiences had at another tournament or in another round. Indeed it could be argued that fewer competitive experiences will increase (the importance of those that do exist, and the tradeoff in health could easily justify the memories. Several years ago, the CEDA organization began offering sweepstakes awards to teams who competed only during the spring semester. While this practice never received widespread support, a few teams did shorten their season to become eligible for this award. However, this was but a single attempt. As Carver (1996) noted, it's time for a "get serious" approach.

As wellness experts agree, the first step to embracing a wellness community is education. Wellness issues must become important to coaches. Perhaps this journal issue can serve as a wake up call for forensic educators to embrace wellness. While we believe our students, as young adults are more resilient and tolerant of contemporary unhealthy forensic practices, we do them no favors by fostering unhealthy practices and may further perpetuate the unhealthy activity in which we were all raised. It's time to become wellness educators in addition to forensic educators by integrating wellness education into each facet of our coaching, so that a student's knowledge of their heart rate, blood pressure, and cholesterol level is as common as their knowledge of their DI's character or DA's evidence. Again, support for our efforts will have to come from us since sadly, our administrators don't have the same financial incentive to keep students healthy as industry does for its employees. We need to objectify what wellness looks like.

Admittedly, we cannot revolutionize forensics overnight; it will be a process of change. However, with full knowledge of what current aspects of our activity jeopardize wellness, we must at the very least make our constituency aware of the potential wellness compromises we may make through active participation. And don't be surprised if you find yourself feeling resistant to change, as forensic educators we've become hooked into the dynamic thrills the activity has to offer. But, before we cater to such an addiction, perhaps we should include full disclosure of some of the unhealthy aspects so that all participants can make an informed choice knowing both the risks and the rewards; in essence, placing a surgeon general's warning on forensics. Only then will we have taken every opportunity to prevent burnout and allow people to choose knowledgeably their level of personal involvement.

Wellness has the potential to be good for forensics. While the transition to more well behaviors may require some relatively major adjustments and some reconceptualizing of competitive goals, these short-term hits are worth a lifetime of happiness and healthiness. Wellness in forensics is something to be embraced, and hopefully will someday be something to be celebrated, right along with all our other countless achievements.

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