INJURY PREVENTION IN THE DUTCH NATIONAL BALLET

Results of focus group meetings

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I. Introduction

On May the 12th 2017 two focus groups (groups interviews) were conducted at the Dutch National Ballet. The first group consisted of seven members of the medical- and artistic staff and the second group of eleven dancers. Aim of the interviews was three folded:

1. to understand how dancers and staff define dance injuries
2. to know which factors dancers and staff identify as risk factors for injuries
3. to gain insights into the recommendation of dancers and staff regarding injury prevention in the Dutch National Ballet

The interviews were audio-recorded and afterwards transcribed verbatim. The verbatim transcribed data was coded, analyzed and categorized according to the above aims. Quotes from the interviews are used to illustrate the results.

II. Part I: injury definition

Results focus group interviews injury definition

Dancers and staff agreed that limitations during rehearsals or performances play a central role in defining whether a dancer is injured or not.

Quote Dancer: “Injury [...] limits you to do your 100%.”

Quote staff: “if you feel limited in your rehearsal, in your daily routine work, so if you feel limited in your hours of work, I think we can call it an injury”

Especially the impact of a musculoskeletal complaint on a dancer’s performance is of importance according to both groups. Furthermore, both groups concluded that pain can be used to define the severity of the injury, but cannot be used solely as injury definition.

Quote Dancer: “You have pain, you can still work through it. But you can’t do your full, your 100% as you can when you are not injured.”

Quote staff: “You are always dancing with some pain, some kind of pain.”

Besides, the dancers mentioned that within the Dutch National Ballet someone is injured when he/she is not participating in rehearsals or performances. However, this was not endorsed by the staff. They mentioned that a dancer is injured when he/she does not, or at a lower level, participate in classes.
Practical implications of injury definition
If the Dutch National Ballet wants to monitor the health of their dancers, it is important to use the different components and dimensions of injury definition mentioned by dancers and staff. This means that the following components should be taken into account:

- Pain
- Performance reduction
- Reduction in rehearsal/training volume
- Time-loss (not being able to participate in performance or classes)

III. Risk factors of injuries

Results focus group interviews risk factors of injuries
Dancers and staff agreed on the fact that the most important risk factor for injuries is a disbalance between load and load capacity (i.e. being able to deal with the load physically and mentally). According to the dancers and staff, most mentioned factors for this disbalance were: planning schedule, current work regulation (CAO) and lack of recovery time.

Practical implications of risk factors of injuries
According to dancers and staff the most important risk factor for injuries is the disbalance between load and load capacity. If the Dutch National Ballet wants to reduce the injury risk of their dancers it is important to gain insight into the amount of individual workload (e.g. classes, rehearsals, performances) and the ability of dancers to deal with this load.

Quote Dancer: “I think within our company [...] when you are injured, you are out”

Quote staff: “[..] when they can’t take classes”

Quote staff: “[..] but I mean they don’t do a full class, they don’t do big jumps. They don’t do the full thing”

Quote Dancer: “[...] its workload and no proper recovery, every day.”

Quote staff: “Some people work more than CAO days just because they need to do the show.”
IV. Injury prevention strategies

Results focus group interviews injury prevention strategies

Dancers and staff stated that injuries can be prevented. Both groups acknowledged that dancers are responsible for their own injury prevention and that the medical staff has a supporting role in this process. Preparation was mentioned as a key element to prevent injuries. However, there is a lack of: 1) recovery time, 2) rehearsal time for new ballet productions and 3) time to perform preventive exercises.

Quote dancer: “[...]you know professional athletes [...] a few weeks before competition/game they start tempering- you work hard and then you take it down. We do the complete opposite, we work really hard, really hard and just before we push it more.”

Quote staff: “[...]talking about one program and a different program, one is quite light and the next one is quite heavy, so even if you do class every day in the light program, the next program is heavy and it’s going to be difficult.”

Quote dancer: “I know I need to do knee exercises or I will get injured. But when we are doing Balanchine and we are traveling every day, I cannot do gym everyday as I usually do.”

Quote dancer: “Today is Friday, and they hung up the cast list for what we have on Monday. Which is a completely new program, so, how can you prepare yourself in 3 days, on tour.”

In addition, there was consensus between dancers and staff regarding the role of communication on the injury prevention process. Dancers emphasized the importance of an open and trustworthy communication with ballet masters. Dancers and staff stated that communication about productions, workload and load capacity between medical- and artistic staff is essential in injury prevention.

Quote dancer: “You always get pain throughout the year. So, if you don’t feel that there is space for you to tell them that you are hurting or that something is going on, than you keep going which will turn into an injury.”

Quote staff: “[…] we need to contact the ballet masters or maybe know, in June is going to be tough for the men and they need to be stronger. We don’t hear that, we don’t ask, we don’t know how it goes through the year. We are always behind.”

Quote staff: “[...]that means that in the future, when the seasons starts, we need to sit together with artistic staff and medical staff. So where is the load, the load is there.”
**Practical implications injury prevention strategies**

Dancers and staff agree that injuries can be prevented. If the Dutch National Ballet wants to prevent injuries it needs to pay attention to preparation time. Dancers need to recover, need enough time for rehearsals of new productions to get used to changed workloads, and must get the opportunity to perform preventive exercises. Besides, communication between dancers, medical staff and artistic staff must be improved to ensure a good balance between workload and workload capacity.

V. Recommendations

Knowledge about the severity, incidence, aetiology and mechanisms of dance related injuries is of key importance in developing preventive strategies to prevent these injuries. Evidence supports the idea that advance planning and communication are the two vital components to develop a good load management system. Therefore, we recommend the Dutch National Ballet to:

1.  monitor frequently (e.g. monthly) the health of dancers using the different components and dimensions of injury definition, namely: pain, reduction in training volume and performances, and time-loss (not being able to participate in performances or classes)

2.  measure workload and the ability of dancers to physically and mentally deal with this load

3.  improve the communication between dancers, medical staff and artistic staff by creating a safe and professional environment around the artist e.g. by means of the Team Around The Artist (TATA) approach supported by an online communication tool.