Better, Faster, Free Medical Care For Olympians

Maria Cheng, AP

Olympic athletes used to speed won't be disappointed if they need medical treatment during the London Games, organizers say. A four-story, $36 million clinic in the newly built Olympic village should be able to treat up to 200 athletes and team officials every day. The patients will get free, 24-hour treatment from volunteer medical staff using some of the latest equipment, like high-tech CT, MRI and X-ray machines.

Experts say they mostly expect to treat minor problems like sprained ankles, strained muscles or minor flu and stomach viruses. Any patients needing serious medical treatment like surgery will be transferred to a local British hospital where emergency treatment is also free. "The ease of access (at the Olympic clinic) is something you won't get anywhere," said Dr. David Whittington, one of the volunteer doctors who is taking unpaid vacation to help staff the clinic. The facility will be open from mid-July to accommodate athletes arriving ahead of the games' official start on July 27.

Although it will be turned into a government-run health facility for local residents after the Olympics, not all of the equipment will be staying. Games organizers bought the pricey machines to treat Olympic athletes and some of them will be available for the government to buy afterwards, but it's unclear if Britain's cash-strapped health system will be able to afford them. The biggest demand won't be for any state-of-the-art equipment, but for physical therapy, also known as physiotherapy. That part of the clinic is still unfinished and will mostly consist of a long hallway with partitions, curtains and a small rehab gym. There will be 30 physical therapists working every shift and others will be on-site at event venues.

Despite the pressure of competition, doctors say athletes won't be able to jump the line or trade on their celebrity to get quick treatment. "(Medical) need will take priority," said Dr. Lawrence Gant, the facility's clinical director.

Organizers also expect a steady supply of patients for the clinic's dentistry services, though athletes and their team members will only be seen if dentists deem they have an immediate need for care. Dentists will also be on standby at sports considered high-risk for tooth accidents, like boxing, taekwondo and water polo. No cosmetic treatments like tooth whitening will be provided. "You don't run better with white teeth," said Wendy Turner, one of the dentists who will be working at the clinic from mid-July. "Maybe your smile just looks better on the podium."

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