

Canada's athletes have more pressing questions than Zika, pollution

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RIO DE JANEIRO – Ask Dr. Robert McCormack, the medical director for the Canadian Olympic Committee, what Canada's athletes are worried about as they arrive in Rio for the Games and he'll tell you it's not the Zika virus, pollution (in the air and water), or security.

"The most pressing question from the athletes is 'what's the Wi-Fi code?'" McCormack said Wednesday at the COC's opening press conference.

It's important to get the important tasks out of the way, right? But, seriously, what about the health concerns that have dominated the coverage for months leading up to Friday night's Opening Ceremony?

"Of course, the health and safety of our athletes is priority number one for us," said Chef de Mission Curt Harnett. "We work with all of the various entities that are involved and that information is being channeled through our chief medical officer, Dr. Bob, in assessing the risk for those athletes."

So Dr. McCormack, how about those risks? Well, Canada's authority on the ground on the matter doesn't seem the least bit perturbed. In fact, it sounds like the precautions being taken by the athletes in Rio aren't any different than what parents tell their kids before heading on a Canadian camping trip.

A [study commissioned by The Associated Press](#) suggests that ingesting three teaspoons of the water teeming with human waste and raw sewage is a sure-fire way to fall ill. The [advice from one expert](#), for athletes and tourists alike,

was simple: "Don't put your head under water."

That's a little easier to do if frolicking around Copacabana beach with a cold drink in hand than it is racing a 10-kilometre in the same water with an Olympic medal on the line.

Yet with all that said and stated, the swimmers and triathletes who will be competing in the now infamous waters over the next two weeks are not concerned about the conditions. Yes, much of that has to do with an athlete's amazing ability to shut out the outside influences that they can't control, but in this instance they have qualified backup for their claims.

"The water quality for the open water swim and triathlon is excellent. It's as good as the water in most of Canada. It meets all international standards," said McCormack.

"I'm from Vancouver. If I went swimming in False Creek or English Bay, I have the same potential risks of getting sick."

The presence of Zika, the mosquito-borne virus that can be particularly damaging to pregnant women and newborn children, still hangs over Rio – the rows upon rows of [insect repellent in the market at Olympic Park](#) are proof of that – but there's optimism there, too.

Reported cases of Zika in [Brazil](#) have dropped in the winter. The word is to remain wary of the blood-sucking critters, but no more so than anyone would anywhere else in the world.

"We're leaving it up to the athletes but our recommendations are that when you're out at dusk and dawn, the times when mosquitos are prominent – and Canadians are all pretty familiar with mosquitos and their habits – is (to wear) appropriate barrier clothing and mosquito repellent," said McCormack.

After all the angst, which was only amplified by a number of high-profile dropouts, the calm and composed rhetoric from a trusted voice has to be soothing. What McCormack – who rightfully points out that there's always some sort of controversy in the run-up to the Olympics, wherever they're being hosted – found in Rio is exactly what he expected.

"Our role is to think of all the possibilities, plan for them with the expectation that it won't be an issue," said McCormack. "We plan, bring supplies, and have contingencies for all kinds of things but I think we have everything under good control."

You know, as long as the Wi-Fi doesn't cut out. Then, who knows how the athletes might react.

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