

# ‘yoga, injuries’ don’t add up

by Suzanne Eggins

For two weeks in June it was the talk of yoga classes Australia-wide. **Media reports** across the nation ran headlines about **‘The Dangers of Yoga’**, claiming yoga had one of the highest injury rates among sports.

Eh? **Yoga, dangerous?**

Between Downward Dog poses and forward bends, my fellow students and I quizzed each other, mystified. As we steadied ourselves in Vrksasana (Tree pose), we dredged our memories to come up with **incidents of yoga injuries** in ourselves or in others.

Even after 10 minutes of lying in Shavasana, the relaxation pose, **we could think of none.** Where had these stories come from? And **how justified were they?**

The source of the media frenzy was the 2004 Medibank Private Sports Injury Report (MPSIR), which can be viewed online at [www.medibank.com.au/healthandwellbeing/sports\\_injuries\\_report.asp](http://www.medibank.com.au/healthandwellbeing/sports_injuries_report.asp). Based on “independent research commissioned by Medibank Private”, this second annual Sports Injury Report claimed to provide “a timely wake up to Australians who enjoy playing and participating in sport”, helpfully putting us on our guard against the financial and physical risks of exercise. The report estimates that 5.2 million sports injuries occur every year in Australia, at an estimated cost of more than \$1.83 billion, with ankle, foot and knee injuries the most common.

What drew the media’s attention was a quarter-page boxed insert on page 4 of the report, headed *Yoga under the spotlight*. Accompanied by a photo of a cheesy-smiling pig-tailed young woman in a slouched non-yogic posture were claims so astounding one can understand the media’s excitement. Here is the key paragraph:

*In our survey, yoga has been identified as a sport with a potentially high injury rate – more than one quarter of all participants surveyed have been injured while practising yoga.*

Could that really be true? Could 25 percent of “all participants surveyed” really have incurred injuries through yoga? But wait: in my head I could hear my journalism lecturer’s mantra “always check statistical claims”.

## The real figures

So I did. The “authoritative independent research” underlying the MPSIR was carried out by a market research firm, TNS, who informed me that the sample consisted of 727 Medibank Private members, each interviewed for an average of 10 minutes. TNS researcher Kimberly Fravil went on to state:

“A total of 3 percent of all respondents reported exercising by yoga in the past 12 months (n=18). The average age is 47.”

The statement “more than one quarter of all participants” related to those who participated in yoga in the past 12 months, not to all respondents.

“Of all respondents who reported participating in yoga in the last 12 months (n=18), n=4 report sustaining an injury from yoga in the past 2 years, with another n=1 reporting an injury in the past 5 years.”

So, Medibank Private’s claims came down to this: four whole people out of a total of 727 had reported being injured doing yoga over the past two years. Did that warrant the claim that “25 percent of all participants surveyed” had been injured while practising yoga? The research team from TNS did not believe so. Kimberly Fravil ended her message with the sentence: “Please interpret these results with caution given the small sample size.”

And others involved in the research also cautioned against drawing conclusions from this sample. Professor Caroline Finch, Head of the NSW Injury Risk Management Research Centre at the University of New South Wales, is named in the MPSIR as having provided academic modelling of injury costs. In an email to me Professor Finch writes:

“I was concerned at the time about a focus on yoga injuries in the Medibank Private Sports Injury Report because we cannot tell at all how reliable that information is.”

Professor Finch then sets out two grounds for questioning the reliability of the research data:

“Firstly, it was obtained from a survey of Medibank Private customers only. This may be a biased sample to start with as it could be people who are more concerned about their health than others or more wealthier and hence can afford health insurance or people who have a history of disease/injury and so want to cover their costs for future treatment – or a number of other reasons.

“Secondly, the customers were asked to state what activities they participated in over the past 12 months and which ones were they injured in. Very few people said they even participated in yoga and the apparent high rate of injuries needs to be interpreted in the light of this very small sample. There are also issues to do with people’s recall of injuries they have had (how accurately can people remember them) and also what they, themselves, consider to be an injury (what one person might think of as an injury, someone else may not report).”

So Professor Finch, one of Australia’s most respected researchers in the field of injury research, considered the sample unrepresentative, too small and the survey method uncontrolled. Why, then, did Medibank Private persist in the yoga claim?



## The community’s ‘affinity’ for yoga

When I put that question – and Professor Finch’s objections – to Medibank Private’s public affairs manager, Brian O’Neil, I gained new insights into publicity processes and ideology. Mr O’Neil denied that the wording in the report (“a quarter of all participants surveyed”) was misleading, although media reports and therefore many members of the public falsely assumed it meant what it said: 25 percent of the full sample of 727 participants.

“There was no intent to draw people to make that inference,” Mr O’Neil maintained, arguing that “in context” the 25 percent claim is clear. Not true. In an article in *The Bulletin* (July 14) John Birmingham writes that “fully one quarter of the 5.2 million sporting injuries which occurred in Australia last year were put down to yoga Nazis”. The article may be tongue-in-cheek, but the misinterpretation of the statistics is serious.

But I moved on to query Mr O’Neil about Medibank Private’s focus on yoga.

Mr O’Neil responded: “One of the reasons that we took into account was that there’s a bit of an affinity with yoga in the community. You see a lot about it in the media. And that was one of the reasons why we thought people might have a bit of interest in the figures that we came up with.”

Ah, the community’s affinity with yoga! But, I suggested to Mr O’Neil, the MPSIR would certainly put the kybosh on that pretty effectively. Would that worry Medibank Private, to have contributed to misinformation that discouraged people from doing yoga?

“All I would really say is that the intent of putting this information out about yoga was really to talk more about the prevention techniques as well, which we do.”

Yes, it’s true, the yoga box does include several sweeping generalisations of questionable relevance or applicability: “Many participants do not adequately prepare or warm up before engaging in a yoga session”, “yoga participants need to ensure that they don’t overdo it” and “treat any injury seriously, no matter how minor”.

Why, I asked Mr O’Neil, had Medibank Private not found the figures on the football codes (acknowledged to cause “more injuries than any other sport”) to be interesting enough to warrant a boxed insert?

“We actually did single out football last year,” Mr O’Neil replied. It seems that Medibank Private felt the need to find something new to focus on. This is worrying logic, as it suggests we should not expect to hear any more about ongoing health risks from Medibank Private.

## The real risk of injuries in yoga

Just why Medibank Private should choose to look at yoga also puzzles experts in the field. Dr Carolyn Broderick, director of the Sports Medicine Unit at the University of New South Wales, told me that in her 15 years as a sports physician she has seen only two people with yoga injuries, compared to the hundreds and hundreds with football, netball and gymnastic injuries.

This led me to ask what the evidence from studies using scientific methodology (as distinct from market research

methodology used in the MPSIR) shows about sports injuries.

“The type of sport you play is the major determinant of injury”, Dr Broderick said, identifying physical contact sports as far and away the highest risk groups.

“Collision sports have the highest representation in the injury statistics, and so both codes of rugby, AFL and soccer would be the top four in Australia.”

Echoing my own thoughts, Dr Broderick admits to mystification about the MPSIR: “I think it is hard to understand – when you look at general injury statistics – that anyone would draw attention to yoga when that’s way down there compared to the football codes.”

**Injury and yoga – a contradiction in terms**

And yet even if the MPSIR statistics are insignificant and unreliable, five Medibank Private members believe they sustained yoga injuries. What might those injuries have been, I wondered, and what might have caused them?

Experienced yoga teacher and physiotherapist Simon Borg-Olivier, co-director of Yoga Synergy in Sydney, makes a breathtaking point: “I always say to my

students when you injure something, generally that’s when you *weren’t* doing yoga, because the two – injury and yoga – it’s a contradiction in terms. If you’re really responsive to what you’re feeling and what you’re doing, you’ll never injure yourself. It’s when we drift off, or become over-aggressive or over-competitive or all the things that we call non-yoga that the injury comes.”

Simon identifies three main factors that can protect students from the risk of slipping into non-yoga and injuring themselves:

- (1) Go to classes only with trained teachers in dedicated yoga schools.
- (2) Abandon the competitive attitude.
- (3) Learn to balance flexibility with strength.

This last needs a qualified teacher who understands the concept of *bandha*. “Bandha in yoga terms is a bit esoteric,” Simon suggests, “but as a physiotherapist, I define it to be the co-activation of opposing muscles around a joint complex. So, in other words, the simultaneous tensing of muscles around the joint.”

For example, Simon explains, when you pull up the knee cap to tighten the front of the thigh (tensing the quadriceps) you

must also tense the hamstrings. Or to go into Padmasana (Lotus pose), you must not yank the leg in, which may damage the knee, usually the most flexible part. Instead you must tighten the 14 muscles around the knee, which will help you stretch the hip, for most people the least flexible bit.

Describing the MPSIR as ‘pathetic’, Simon suggests the yoga focus is motivated by a combination of the publicists’ needs to be controversial and their desire to prune back the ‘tall poppy’ that yoga has become in the Australian health and fitness scene.

How can we respond to such misrepresentations of yoga and the selective use of statistics? Our best option is to follow Swami Vivekananda’s advice: “let your life speak for you”. By continuing to practise yoga and reap its benefits, we can prove to the Australian community that the only *real* risks of yoga are health, equanimity and the insight to see the truth.

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