

Senate Inquiry

The Concussions and Repeated Head Trauma in Contact Sports

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

My name is Dr Benjamin Chen and I am a practicing rehabilitation physician in Gold Coast Health.

If our society were to accept contact sports as part of our social fabric and welcome its positive impact on economy and people's sense of wellbeing, then we would also have a duty to manage the darker side of contact sports, in particular, supporting players who suffer repeated head injuries and the deleterious effect such have on the lives of the players and those around them.

Repeated concussions, aside from the possibility of derailing or shortening sporting careers, have far-reaching consequences beyond the player's playing life. Repeated concussions and their sequelae have the potential to limit the vocational and earning capacity of a sportsperson during and after his time in the sport; unrecognized or underrecognized symptoms of traumatic brain injury impacts on one's emotional, functional and social wellbeing and can lead to maladaptive lifestyles which end in relationship breakdowns, inappropriate use of alcohol, prescription or even illicit drugs, unemployment or underemployment. There are emerging evidence to suggest a "maladaptive early ageing phenotype characterized by premature burden of chronic disease and healthspan." (Grashow et al, Br J Sports Med 2022)

Most of contact sport players, even at elite level, do not necessarily have a greater earning capacity when earning capacity is viewed from a lifespan point of view. In addition, concussions happen at lower grades just as commonly as higher grades, and those suffer concussions whilst playing at lower grade would have their lifespan earning capacity diminished, without ever having the earning opportunity that elite players might enjoy, however long or short their playing career happen to be.

Adequate funding needs to be quarantined in order to support contact sport players (of all grades) to manage the higher-than-expected incidence of traumatic brain injury and its sequelae. Possible funding sources may include:

1. Increased WorkCover premium for employers
2. Quarantined revenue from advertisement, sponsorship, merchandise sales and gate receipts
3. Employer or league sponsored private health insurance that continue after the playing days of a player

Access to competent, dedicatedly funded traumatic brain injury / concussion rehabilitation services well equipped to detect and offer assistance for cognitive, functional, psychological and social impacts of repeated concussion would in the long term reduce the burden of disability, improve life potential and wellbeing, as well as reducing the tangible and intangible cost of concussions / traumatic brain injuries on the players, their loved ones and the society.

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