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National Health and Medical Research Council submission to Inquiry into concussions and repeated head trauma in contact sports

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) is Australia's leading expert body in health and medical research. It has a legislated role in issuing guidelines, and advising the community, on matters relating to the improvement of health and the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of disease.

This brief submission addresses the Inquiry's term of reference on *'the guidelines and practices contact sports associations and clubs follow in cases of player concussions and repeated head trauma, including practices undermining recovery periods and potential risk disclosure.'*

There are no current NHMRC-produced guidelines on concussions or repeated head trauma, or any relevant NHMRC-approved guidelines produced by third parties. However, it may be useful to understand NHMRC's historical role on these topics.

NHMRC published its *Boxing Injuries* report in 1994, updating the earlier *Health Aspects of Boxing* (1986). It was developed by a panel with expertise in sports medicine, neurosurgery, ophthalmology, radiology, general practice, neurology and neuropsychology, and provided new directions for those concerned with public health and legislation appropriate for boxing. The report highlighted the non-neurological injuries that can follow repeated head trauma in boxing, such as damage to the eye, neck, nose and ears and hearing, and reported that protective equipment may not reduce the risk of brain injury. The report made three recommendations:

1. That professional boxing be prohibited
2. That boxing and kickboxing or any other sport in which direct blows to the head are the object of the sport should be actively discouraged
3. Where amateur boxing is allowed under strict regulation, education and research programs should be introduced with mandatory long-term follow-up of all boxers and informed written consent obtained from boxers or, in the case of minors, from at least one parent or guardian.

In 1995 NHMRC released *Head and Neck Injuries in Football: Guidelines for Prevention and Management* with an accompanying *Concussion: Notes for Referees, Umpires and Coaches*.

The guidelines were developed by a panel of medical specialists in neurosurgery, sports medicine, plastic surgery, neurology, rheumatology, trauma and rehabilitation. The panel included medical experts representing the Australian football codes including the International Rugby Football Board, Australian Rugby League, ACT Rugby Union, the Australian Soccer Federation and the Australian Football League.

The guidelines made broad recommendations on management and administrative arrangements, data collection, equipment (such as fitted mouthguards) and research and education. In addition, the guidelines contained recommendations on the management of concussion, post-concussion and return to play (adapted from International Rugby Football Board recommendations), and the management of severe head injury.

The accompanying notes for referees, umpires and coaches made a recommendation that, because concussion destroys judgement, head injured players should not be allowed to influence the decision of a

referee, umpire or coach about whether the player should be removed from play. The notes point out that the player's health and the reputation of the game are at stake.

These NHMRC guidelines were released for public consultation before being published.

The NHMRC guidelines are now considered to be out of date and were rescinded in 2004. It is our usual practice to rescind guidelines after several years, recognising that the evidence review(s) relied upon to produce those guidelines are now out of date. The guidelines have not been updated as other agencies have been established to manage and provide up-to-date advice about the issues discussed in the NHMRC guidelines.

Since the guidelines were rescinded in 2004, NHMRC has provided grants totalling \$6.4 million for research on sports-related concussion.

Yours sincerely,

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