

Canada needs single protocol for concussions, former pro athletes say

Ken Dryden speech demands better protection from head trauma

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by The Canadian Press

OTTAWA (The Canadian Press) — Hockey legend Ken Dryden laid down a challenge Tuesday to sports executives in charge of leagues and federations to do more to protect athletes from the debilitating effects of head injuries.

In a blunt speech, Dryden took aim at the culture around concussions and drew a connecting line between head injuries and brain disease.

His keynote address at a one-day conference organized by Gov. Gen. David Johnston came two weeks after Canadian Football League commissioner Jeffrey Orridge said the science about football-related head trauma and brain disease is inconclusive.

The statement was a departure from the conclusion of the National Football League's top health and safety officer, Jeff Miller, who told a U.S. congressional committee in March that linked football to chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE.

Dryden said research shows a relationship between head trauma and long-term brain injuries.

There is still much to learn about the brain, he said, but that shouldn't be an excuse for sports executives to do nothing until researchers unlock more information.

"In some things in our lives, we are the decision-makers and we know sometimes we get things wrong, but we can't get the big ones wrong," he said. "The ones where, 25 or 50 years from now, people will look back at us and say, 'how could they have been so stupid?'"

"It is time for the decision-makers to catch up with the scientists. More importantly, it is time for the decision-makers to catch up with the life impact of their sport on their players."

Dryden's speech punctuated a conference that brought together athletes, coaches, teachers and researchers to figure out what the country can do to address rising concerns about head trauma.

Johnston said the country can do better when it comes to dealing with head injuries, from better awareness of the risks and symptoms of head injuries, to rule changes to mitigate the risks sports pose to young athletes. He said there must also be cultural changes in the way Canadians view head injuries.

“We have to overcome this culture of stiff upper lip, or it’s a bit of a badge of honour to have your bell rung a few times,” said Johnston, who suffered three concussions in his youth, one that led to him losing feeling in part of his left hand.

Former CFL quarterback Matt Dunigan said young athletes and even those at the professional level need to know it’s okay to take themselves out of a game if they have a head injury. Dunigan began tearing up as he talked about stumbling through his words and thoughts, a result he said of multiple concussions during his playing career.

Federal and provincial governments began work in June on a national program to raise awareness, encourage prevention and manage concussions. In a statement, the federal ministers in charge touted a \$1.4 million plan to develop national guidelines and protocols.

Former NHL player Eric Lindros said there is a need for a national standard to diagnose and treat concussions that could be taught in schools and help young athletes, coaches and their parents recognize a head injury.

“There are so many people trying to help, but the messaging is always a little bit different and it’s confusing for parents, it’s confusing for people,” said Lindros, who suffered multiple concussions during his career.

Athletes at the day-long forum said they had issues identifying their own concussions because symptoms can overlap or be confused with neck or back injuries. Nor can you expect a concussed athlete to know they are experiencing a concussion, said former Paralympic alpine skier Karolina Wisniewska.

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