

Research tackles attitudes to concussion

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Professor Janet Leathem

(Medical Xpress) -- Rugby players and the sports media continue to underestimate the seriousness of concussion, a School of Psychology study has concluded.

The study, conducted during last year's Rugby World Cup, found that nearly half of all players deemed to have suffered [concussion](#) – a disturbance of the brain after a blow or violent shaking of the head – returned to the field before the expiry of the mandatory three-week stand-down established in guidelines drawn up by the Accident

Compensation Corporation and the International Rugby Board.

Psychology student Natasha Bauer, who carried out the research as part of her honours clinical psychology dissertation, studied television footage of all 48 matches played at the tournament and says it showed many players and officials appeared oblivious to the seriousness of such injuries.

Ms. Bauer noted 95 incidents involving potential brain injuries. She reviewed each of them and a second researcher, clinical psychologist Ian de Terte, then checked her incident report.

Neuropsychologist Professor Janet Leathem, who devised the study after seeing the results of one conducted on rugby league players in Australia, also reviewed the incidents and determined there was sufficient evidence of "probable concussion" in 13 cases.

Most involved playing stopping and players being attended to by medical staff, although in some cases the medics ran on to help while play continued. Six left the field immediately and seven were allowed to play on. However, six of the seven were substituted later in the game.

Ms. Bauer says media reports tended to ignore or downplay the possible impacts of head knocks on players. "There seemed to be no awareness that a concussion occurred and, when it was noticed, it was not treated as a big deal," she says.

The researchers also felt that the way television commentators (all 48 games were watched on free-to-air Māori Television) described such incidents through jokes and colloquial expressions contributed to a casual feeling within the sport about the effects of concussion.

Their report quotes commentators describing one player as wobbling

“like a drunken rhino”, another being “knocked for six” and one broadcaster saying “I wonder how many sets of goal posts he’s looking at now?”

The researchers also felt commentators dismissed the seriousness of incidents by underlining the commitment and toughness of players, with remarks such as “he will take the knocks but he will keep getting up” and “brave fella”.

Other expressions used to play down injuries included: “he was milking that”, “think he’s just thirsty”, “bit of ice, won’t feel a thing” and “smelling salts; that ought to do the trick”.

Ms. Bauer says “it was totally understandable” why media outlets, marketing top-level sport as mass entertainment, where money and prestige were on the line, portrayed such incidents the way they did.

Professor Leathem says medical statistics that showed a player who suffered a concussion was more likely to have another, carried a far more sombre message.

“If you have a second injury too close to the first one, it can be fatal. The message to administrators and the media is that we want [players](#) to not take concussion lightly. If you get a bang on the head, get it seen to and follow the guidelines now listed clearly in a short video on the [NZRU \[New Zealand Rugby Union\] website.](#)”

Provided by Massey University

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