

More needed to protect our sportspeople from brain injury, experts say

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Two University of Birmingham academics are calling for more research to be carried out looking at how the brains of sportspeople – including children – react when they receive a blow to the head.

Their call is echoed by Dawn Astle and Peter Robinson. Dawn Astle, is the daughter of former West Bromwich Albion player Jeff Astle who, an inquest found, died from brain trauma caused by heading heavy footballs - a condition known as Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE). Peter Robinson is the father of Ben Robinson, whose son died as a result of repeated concussions during a rugby match.

Dr Michael Grey, from the University's School of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation Sciences, and Prof Tony Belli, from the School of Clinical and Experimental Medicine, are running a study to investigate the brains of sportspeople in the aftermath of a [concussion](#) – they are trying to develop a better test to aid the return to play decision.

This week (Thursday), during the British Science Festival, they will host a gathering of key researchers and clinicians across the UK at Birmingham to share research ideas which may ultimately lead to answers over the damage done by repeated [head](#) trauma in sport.

The duo want to see more being done to protect players of all ages and levels, from grassroots sport to the professionals. This includes better education programmes about how to recognise concussion and stricter adherence to return to play guidelines.

Last month, a group of parents in the USA filed a lawsuit against FIFA which pushes for rule changes around the return to play following a concussion, as well as limits on how many times children under 17 can head the ball.

Dr Grey agrees that heading the ball could have serious repercussions for children and said: "There is good evidence to suggest heading the ball in children needs to be looked at very closely. Children's brains are not fully formed, they are not as well protected as an adult and we do not fully understand the damage these repeated blows to the head are doing to these children's brains. We must have more research into this area."

Prof Belli is concerned that second [impact syndrome](#) – where a person who has had one concussion then has a second blow to the head which is magnified by the first – is not yet fully understood. He said: "The issue of second impact syndrome is not that well-known but the brain can suffer very serious damage – and the fact people are not heeding that is very worrying. We must get the message through in all sports that if a player has had a concussion, they must not play on, as the ramifications of a second blow – even if it looks minor to the observer – could be very grave indeed."

Provided by University of Birmingham

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