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Act now to support student athletes' health care

By Jeff G. Konin, special to the Times

The past few days there have been headlines about the collapse of a high school cross-country runner. Luckily, the episode did not have a tragic ending. But we should all use this as a stimulus to act now and not wait for a more serious event to occur in our community.

Here are some facts about trainers. The National Athletic Trainers' Association recently reported that an estimated 42 percent of high schools nationwide have "access" to a certified athletic trainer. A portion of these schools merely provide "access" for football games, ignoring the needs during practice sessions, the needs of all other student athletes who play a sport other than football, and especially ignoring the needs of female student athletes. Of equal concern, the schools that do provide a full-time athletic trainer place the responsibility for health care concerns for some 300 to 400 student athletes daily on the shoulders of one individual.

How many other health care providers care for that many individuals on a daily basis without support staff? And that doesn't take into account that these student athletes participate at numerous venues simultaneously, all during the same small block of time outside of classroom hours.

Those of us in the medical community have been encouraging secondary school administrators to prioritize the needs for appropriate medical coverage for their student athletes. In our view, it is a minimal obligation when offering an athletics program. Unfortunately, all too often the responses that we entertain echo the agreement for the need for proper medical services, but note the lack of sufficient funds to provide such care. We all understand the challenges faced in today's economy. We also understand the need to hire competent teachers to keep classroom sizes acceptable for ideal learning.

The question is, do we yet understand what the value of a life is when it comes to our children? Unfortunately, it is typically a catastrophic episode that brings the issue of inadequate medical coverage in our high schools to the attention of the general public.

At the University of South Florida, we have spent the past five years implementing the SMART program - Sports Medicine & Athletic Related Trauma - in an effort to increase the awareness and services of sports medicine to the Tampa Bay community. In Hillsborough and Pasco counties we have provided certified athletic trainers annually to high schools. We have regularly offered sports injury courses on topics related to heat illness, sudden cardiac death, MRSA and other major concerns to coaches and parents at no cost. We have also developed a website that has vast amounts of sports safety information available to all viewers.

Unfortunately, we cannot do everything and be everywhere. And like everyone else, our funding is limited. However, we will continue to do our part to promote a safe sporting environment for student athletes.

Our research has shown that the typical cost for a certified athletic trainer at a public high school in Hillsborough County equates to less than \$1 per day per participant.

As a parent, is this too much for you to pay for assurance that your student athlete is receiving daily on-site professional training services while you are not present and entrusting his or her safety to school officials? Is this a dollar amount you feel school administrators should locate in an effort to provide a safe return on their investment? Do the current economic times make this dollar amount insurmountable? Should your child be less safe today versus 10 years ago simply because the economy is not as good? We are talking about high school sports participation - events where memories should last a lifetime, not end a life.

USF and the SMART program will continue to serve as a national model for promoting a safe sporting environment for the Tampa Bay community. Doing so remains a collaborative effort among medical providers, coaches, parents, administrators, student athletes, community leaders and philanthropists. Together, we can work toward improving the safety of our student athletes.

It is time to truly respond in the appropriate manner to the safety needs of our physically active children and not the delay these efforts any longer.

Jeff G. Konin, executive director of the Sports Medicine & Athletic Related Trauma (SMART) Institute at the University of South Florida, can be reached at (813) 396-9627 or jkonin@health.usf.edu.

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