

Middlesex County brain-injury treatment advocates hopeful about state addressing youth athletes, concussions

HARRY FREZZA • STAFF WRITER • February 13, 2010

Barbara Geiger-Parker is hopeful about a hearing next month by the New Jersey Assembly Education Committee on concussions and youth sports.

"There's a couple of components: attempt to increase the understanding of concussion for the coaches and the student athletes and their families and for guidelines that a concussion suspect has to be immediately taken out of game and a return is dependent on a medical OK," said Geiger-Parker, president and chief executive officer of the North Brunswick-based Brain Injury Association of New Jersey. "A bill hasn't been developed, but hopefully after the hearing."

Growing concern about concussions, their frequency and their effects on young athletes was one of the reasons why Watchung Hills Regional High School in Warren on Thursday hosted a workshop about the dangers of such an injury.

At least 50 district-wide coaches, as well as teachers, attended the program to learn more.

One of the speakers at Thursday's gathering included Dr. Joseph Rempson, co-medical director and co-founder of the Atlantic [Health Care](#)

Sports Concussion Center at Overlook Hospital in Summit. Rempson works with athletes on screening, postconcussion care, exercise and when it's the right time to return to the playing field.

INJURY STATISTICS: About 1.4 million Americans suffer Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) each year and an estimated 3.2 million are living with long-term, severe disabilities as a result of brain injury. Teenagers are a major part of that number, and Rempson has seen many, some of whom won't ever be the same because they return too soon and don't get proper care and rest.

"About five to 10 percent of the kids I've seen don't get their IQ points back, I have A students who have become C students, doesn't matter if they are high school, college, [elementary school](#)

," said Rempson. "I've had workers in the professional community, a lawyer who had to give up his law practice recently because the brain didn't recover."

The ability to remember, to concentrate and focus on things doesn't return.

"Persistent headache, dizziness don't have to go away, they can last one year, two years, they can last three years, they can last indefinitely," Rempson said. "The problem with those youngsters who go through those issues is that a lot of times the focus is put on sports. If anybody knows anybody who has known anyone who has had a significant concussive episode, they're not going to school, they're not hanging out with friends. That active, bubbly child who was running around your house is now sitting in their room."

East Brunswick High School trainer Phil Hossler has had a passion for the subject for years. He has written one book on the topic and is finishing another. Hossler is grateful that the issue is getting attention.

Hossler explained that teenage brains recover slower than adults. There is no grading of the severity of a concussion.

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"Big or small (concussion) and you're sitting. You're under the umbrella," said Hossler. "Some people might ask, 'how bad is it?' You really don't know until you find how long the symptoms last."

Hossler said players aren't always eager to talk about their symptoms, but watchful eyes are critical.

"You might find out from a kid's best friend because maybe the player who's been hurt will be more honest with them," Hossler said. "The best friend might come to me and say 'so and so hasn't been acting right.'"

SYMPTOMS WATCH: Hossler has compiled a checklist of points when a school athlete suffers a concussion. The nurse is informed, who then makes sure the athlete's teachers know.

"Mental rest is critical as physical," Hossler said. "You can't be reading, can't be watching television or video. You can't sit him near a window (because sunlight effects the brain)."

Geiger-Parker added that professional athletes talking about their experience with brain injury has been a turning point.

"It helps when one of their heroes says 'you can't play with a concussion,'" she said.

Rempson spoke about former Cowboys' quarterback Troy Aikman not remembering the details of a game, not recalling how he played or who won the game he had played in. Rempson said the San Francisco 49ers also had two playbooks for former quarterback Steve Young, who suffered several concussions during his career.

"Aikman played in an NFC championship game, got concussed in the third quarter, and after the game ended up in the hospital," Rempson said, further detailing the conversation between Aikman and agent Leigh Steinberg — and how Steinberg had to tell the star athlete that his team was going to the Super Bowl.

Despite these kinds of stories, Rempson added, the message about concussions continues stalling on some level. Part of it, he said, is the old "suck it up" attitude held by athletes for decades.

As part of Thursday's seminar, the Watchung Hills

coaches saw a short film about a young football player from Washington State who suffered a second concussion in a junior varsity game and has suffered permanent brain damage as a result.

"Many times we have people who go to an emergency room after a game and say the MRI didn't show a concussion, but they don't show concussions," said Rempson, adding that a very small percentage of injured athletes lose consciousness after suffering one.

"This one youngster from Montclair (Ryne Morrison in 2008) had one. His (the MRI) was negative. He didn't tell anyone about his symptoms, played the next weekend and similar to this gentlemen (in the film) collapsed on the field," Rempson said. "The difference between the youngster from Montclair and this one? The youngster from Montclair didn't survive. Fifty percent of the youngsters with second-impact syndrome pass away, the other 50 percent are permanently disabled. It's a significant issue."

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