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Our view

ImPACT is good step in tracking concussions

The use of the ImPACT system at St. Cloud State University to track athletes who have suffered concussions and help determine when they are able to return to play speaks volumes about the increased awareness of head injuries in competitive, contact sports.

That's a good thing.

And it would be even better if the Immediate Post Concussion Assessment and Cognitive Testing system eventually becomes standard medical procedure for any person who suffers a concussion in sports or recreation.

Through extensive before- and after-testing of a person's memory, the ImPACT system helps show how a person's recovery is progressing.

But considering St. Cloud State is one of less than 100 colleges using ImPACT, it's clearly going to be years or even decades before it or similar tools become widely accepted.

Knowing that on average there are about 300,000 traumatic brain injuries every year in the United States, what can athletes, coaches and parents do?

Start by familiarizing yourself with the basics about concussions.

First, it is a myth that a person must lose consciousness to have a concussion. Immediate symptoms range from blurred vision and an inability to remember names and dates to a constant ringing in the ears.

Some symptoms might not show up for days or even weeks. Or they may not go away. Examples include constant low-grade headaches, neck pain, difficulty concentrating, extreme sensitivity to noise and light or changes in sleep patterns.

Be aware that the following symptoms require immediate medical attention: slurred speech, vomiting, numbness or lost coordination, differing size pupils, and restlessness or agitation.

Doctors routinely say that the best way to avoid a concussion is to take steps to prevent one. Depending on the age of the person and the activity, that can mean many things.

For example, soccer is a popular sport for very young children. As such it's critical that kids know the proper way to head the ball. Some leagues even ban heading until certain ages.

Similarly, most youth hockey leagues don't allow checking until players are at least in middle school. And some youth football leagues group players by size and weight instead of age to minimize the risk of big and small bodies colliding.

As athletes get older, the challenge in reducing the risks grows. The combination of strength, size and speed leads to more of an emphasis on quality equipment and using it properly.

Helmets are critical. Make sure they are in good condition and double-check how athletes use them. Even the best helmet offers little protection if it doesn't stay in place during contact.

Mouth guards also are essential. They not only save on dental work, but they help absorb the force of a lower jaw smacking upward and inward toward the brain stem.

It's important to note these two items — helmets and mouth guards — can be applied to more than just hockey or football players. In-line skaters, skateboarders and snowboarders should make them standard equipment.

And again, the role of coaches and parents can't be overlooked. They need to be more vigilant. Make sure equipment is being used. And most importantly, don't rely on the athlete to tell the truth about their condition.

Examine and question them, and don't hesitate to call a doctor if you aren't satisfied with your findings.