



Australian Government

Australian Government response to the
Senate Community Affairs References Committee's report:
Concussions and repeated head trauma in contact sports

[OCTOBER 2024]

Introduction

The Australian Government is providing a response to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee's (the Committee) report *Concussions and repeated head trauma in contact sports* released in September 2023.

On 1 December 2022, the Senate referred an inquiry into concussions and repeated head trauma in contact sports to the Committee for inquiry and report. The Committee was tasked with inquiring into and reporting on concussions and repeated head trauma in contact sports at all levels, for all genders and age groups, with particular reference to:

- a) the guidelines and practices contact sports associations and clubs follow in cases of player concussions and repeated head trauma, including practices undermining recovery periods and potential risk disclosure;
- b) the long-term impacts of concussions and repeated head trauma, including but not limited to mental, physical, social and professional impacts;
- c) the long and short-term support available to players affected by concussion and repeated head trauma;
- d) the liability of contact sports associations and clubs for long-term impacts of player concussions and repeated head trauma;
- e) the role of sports associations and clubs in the debate around concussion and repeated head trauma, including in financing research;
- f) the lack of a consistent definition of what constitutes 'concussion';
- g) the prevalence, monitoring and reporting of concussion and long-term impacts of concussion and repeated head trauma, including in First Nations communities;
- h) workers, or other, compensation mechanisms for players affected by long-term impacts of concussions and repeated head trauma;
- i) alternative approaches to concussions and repeated head trauma in contact sport, and awareness raising about its risks;
- j) international experiences in modifying sports for children; and
- k) any other related matters.

The final report makes 13 recommendations to the Australian Government, focused on improving data, research, education, harm minimisation and injury support.

Response to Recommendations

Key theme: Data Improvements

Recommendation 1

The committee recommends that the Australian Government establish the National Sports Injury Database as a matter of urgency, noting this will significantly help address the lack of sports injury data available in Australia, including at the community level of sport.

Recommendation 2

With a view to increasing transparency, the committee recommends that professional sporting codes collect data on concussions and identified sub concussive events and share this data with the National Sports Injury Database.

Response:

The Government **agrees in principle** with the recommendations and acknowledges the role of improved sports injury data collection to inform prevention and treatment outcomes.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) is responsible for national reporting on injury in Australia. In partnership with the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) the AIHW have developed the National Sports Injury Data Strategy (the Strategy) to identify the national data available on sport and active recreation injury prevention and management. The 2022-23 Budget provided the ASC with \$2.8 million over four years to progress the development of the Strategy with the AIHW.

The Strategy aims to improve the availability of data on sport and active recreation injuries in Australia by leveraging existing data sources, strengthening data collection methods and standards, and creating a national sport and active recreation injury database: the National Sport Injury Data Asset (NSIDA). The NSIDA will provide valuable insight on the impact of these injuries by:

- helping individuals, organisations, researchers, and policymakers understand the risks of injury in sport and active recreation
- identifying injury patterns and trends
- measuring the costs of sport and active recreation injuries to the health system and the benefits of prevention programs
- indicating where and what type of injury prevention programs are needed
- providing ongoing surveillance (subject to funding) to identify emerging risks and evaluate injury prevention programs in the community.

There is currently no mandate for sporting organisations to collect, report or share data on sports injury. Some community sporting codes collect their own data; however, most sources of sport and active recreation injury data vary in the types and amounts of information being collected, quality (e.g. accuracy, completeness, consistency), and format. Ongoing access to consistent and high-quality data, particularly from community sporting organisations, would allow the NSIDA to provide evidence for better understanding of the

impacts of sport and active recreation injuries. This will support participation in sport and active recreation and improve the overall wellbeing of Australians. The Government recognises the benefits of optimising data collection and sharing however, further consideration is required as to how this is best achieved.

In laying the foundation for developing the NSIDA, the AIHW is currently creating a data collection manual and an updated sports injury data dictionary to support data collectors to expand, improve and standardise the injury data they are currently collecting.

Key theme: Research

Recommendation 3

The committee recommends that the Australian Government consider establishing independent research pathways, including through a newly created body or through existing bodies, such as the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), that is dedicated to supporting and coordinating research into the short and long-term effects of concussion and repeated head trauma incurred during participation in sport, including Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE).

The committee envisages that, amongst other things, such pathways would enable well-structured scientific investigations—including prospective, longitudinal clinicopathological studies—to help identify clinical features, progression, and interventions.

Recommendation 4

The committee recommends that the Australian Government and sporting organisations continue to fund research into the effects of concussion and repeated head trauma on at-risk cohorts who incur these injuries during their participation in sport.

Recommendation 5

The committee recommends that the Australian Government consider measures to encourage Australians, in the event of their death, to donate their brain to a brain bank for scientific research into brain health and disease, including Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy.

Recommendation 6

The committee recommends that the Australian Government consider a coordinated and consolidated funding framework for ongoing research regarding sport-related concussion and repeated head trauma.

This work should be undertaken in consultation with state and territory governments, sporting organisations, universities, and other scientific research bodies. The committee recommends the governing bodies of sports associated with concussion and repeated head trauma support their codes to invest in the health and welfare of their players.

Response:

The Government **agrees in principle** with the recommendations four and five and supports the need for research to understand the short- and long-term impact of concussion and repeated head trauma.

The Government currently funds research focussed on Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) through the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) grant opportunities, and the NHMRC. The MRFF, established under the *Medical Research Future Fund Act 2015* (MRFF Act), provides grants of financial assistance to support vital health and medical research and innovation to improve the health and wellbeing of Australians. The NHMRC is an independent statutory

agency within the portfolio of the Australian Government Minister for Health and Aged Care. They are the nation's leading expert body in health and medical research.

Through the MRFF, \$50 million has been committed over ten years to the TBI Mission to support research designed to improve the lives of all Australians who experience mild, moderate, and severe TBIs and improve patient recovery after brain injury. This includes projects that predict recovery outcomes or identify effective care and treatments, to reduce barriers to living the best quality of life after a traumatic brain injury. Since its inception in 2015, the Government, through the MRFF, has invested \$7.5 million in 6 grants with a focus on concussion research, primarily through the TBI Mission. A review of the TBI Mission's Roadmap and Implementation Plan is currently underway to ensure the Mission accounts for emerging evidence and is consistent with the Government's responses to the Senate Inquiry into concussions and repeated head trauma in contact sport and the Inquiry into family, domestic and sexual violence. The review will also allow consideration of recent policy frameworks such as the National Plan to end Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032, and relevant action plans such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan 2023–2025. The review is expected to be completed by the end of 2024.

Between 2013 and 2022, the NHMRC expended \$1.6 million towards research relevant to CTE and \$92.7 million towards research relevant to TBI. The NHMRC also supports Targeted Calls for Research (TCRs), through a one-time request for grant applications to address a specific health issue where there is a significant knowledge gap or unmet need.

The ASC provides clear and concise advice, information and support for Australian sport related matters, including sport-related concussion. In 2021, the Government provided \$340,000 to the ASC as part of the *Concussion and Brain Health Project (2021-24)*. The project aims to provide clear, consistent, and current messaging regarding concussion and brain health in alignment with the latest medical advice and improve the understanding of the relationship between sport-related concussion and long-term brain health by undertaking the recruitment of a comparison group/control arm of former elite able-bodied athletes from non-contact, collision, or combat sports (for example, swimmers, rowers, and track and field athletes). The ASC also received \$60,000 USD (approximately \$80,000 AUD) from the International Olympic Committee (IOC) for the recruitment and data collection of 30 former female contact sport athletes. The findings from this study will be publicly available upon completion of data collection and analysis.

The Government agrees in principle with recommendation five regarding encouraging donations to brain banks and supports the need to understand the relationship between findings of CTE histopathological change at autopsy with symptoms (or absence of symptoms) in life. However, further considerations are needed to reduce risk of bias by blinding studies (histopathologists should not know history of deceased person at time of autopsy) and considering a second opinion on all new CTE cases identified by histopathologist separate from CTE research labs. Consideration should also be given to encouraging brain donation from former contact / collision sport athletes who had no symptoms of poor brain health at the time of death.

The Government **notes** recommendations three and six. There are existing funding frameworks in place for research regarding sport-related concussion and repeated head

trauma. The Government continues to consult with state and territory governments, sporting organisations, universities, and other scientific research bodies around ongoing research and the development of pathways to enable well-structured scientific investigations—including prospective, longitudinal clinicopathological studies—to help identify clinical features, progression, and interventions.

Key theme: Education

Recommendation 7

The committee recommends that the Department of Health and Aged Care in consultation with relevant stakeholders, consider how best to improve community awareness and education regarding concussion and repeated head trauma, with these measures being health lead. These initiatives would help individuals:

- *recognise the acute signs and symptoms of concussion;*
- *appropriately respond to and manage such injuries; and*
- *understand the short- and long-term risks of concussion and repeated head trauma.*

The committee recommends the development of awareness and education initiatives, with appropriate consideration given to dissemination strategies; the need to review or update existing materials; and ensuring tailored resources are available to different cohorts including, players, parents, coaches, teachers, other volunteers involved in sport and the general public.

Recommendation 8

The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in partnership with state and territory governments consider how best to address calls for:

- *the development of standardised, evidence-based, and easy-to access concussion and head trauma guidelines for GPs;*
- *suitable general practice consultations for people with concussion, repeated head trauma and other complex care needs; and*
- *increased training for first aid responders at sporting venues that focuses specifically on treating concussion and head injury.*

Response:

The Government **agrees** with the recommendations.

On 1 February 2024, the ASC, through the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS), launched an updated version of the *Concussion and Brain Health Position Statement* (the 2024 Position Statement) in partnership with the Australasian College of Sport and Exercise Physicians, Sports Medicine Australia and the Australian Physiotherapy Association. The 2024 Position Statement provides contemporary evidence-based information on concussion, including the Australian Concussion Guidelines for Community and Youth Sport, which in a world first, aligns concussion advice in the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia. The ASC engaged with the United Kingdom through the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and New Zealand's Accident Compensation Corporation on their successful education and awareness material to progress international alignment of guidance and materials.

The 2024 Position Statement brings together the latest evidence-based information and operates on a principle of 'an abundance of caution' i.e., *'if in doubt, sit them out.'* The

Statement contains guidance for adaptable return to play protocols, including more conservative approaches for children and adults with a history of multiple concussions.

The ASC launched the Concussion in Sport Australia website in 2019, which contains the 2024 Position Statement. The website also has resources and online modules to assist in addressing and managing sport-related concussion, tailored to athletes, coaches, teachers, parents, medical practitioners, and health care practitioners. It has become a valuable and trusted resource for the management of sports-related concussion for all Australians, regardless of the sport, location, or level of participation. The ASC keeps the website up to date, and added educational resources (i.e. Infographics, fact sheets and videos) in February 2024.

In addition to the Concussion in Sport Australia website, the ASC developed media campaigns and social media activity to support the launch of the 2024 Position Statement. It has also started a series of education initiatives for schools and community groups, to raise awareness and educate in relation to concussion.

The Government is complementing these efforts with a new initiative to increase public awareness about CTE. The 2024-25 Budget committed \$12.5 million to Dementia Australia to support populations at risk of dementia, including those with suspected CTE. This funding will support Dementia Australia to develop and rollout a community awareness and education campaign on concussion and maintaining brain health, including while participating in sport. This campaign will be informed by consultation with teachers, parents, students, researchers, sports organisations and people with lived experience of CTE symptoms. Dementia Australia will also work closely with the ASC to ensure alignment and consistency of messaging.

The ASC welcomes opportunities to further promote awareness and education to the wider public. Ongoing monitoring of research and evidence will inform the continuous refinement of supporting education resources. This will include updated internationally recognised evidence to support the most contemporary approach to education and awareness of concussion in sport.

Key theme: Harm Minimisation

Recommendation 9

The committee recommends that national sporting organisations in Australia explore further rule modifications for their respective sports in order to prevent and reduce the impact of concussion and repeated head trauma. This work should prioritise modifications that protect children and adolescents and take into account emerging evidence both domestically and internationally.

Recommendation 10

The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in collaboration with medical experts, develops return to play protocols, adaptable across all sports, for both children and adults that have incurred a concussion or suffered a head trauma. The committee envisages that protocols may include lengthier standdown periods for children and individuals who have a history of repeated head trauma.

Recommendation 11

The committee recommends that the Australian Government consider developing a national strategy to reduce the incidence and impacts of concussion, including binding return to play protocols and other rules to protect sport participants from head injuries. Consideration should be given to whether any existing government bodies would be best placed to monitor, oversee and/or enforce concussion related rules and return to play protocols in Australian sports.

Response:

The Government **notes** recommendation nine as it does not have responsibility for the matters outlined in this recommendation. The Government will support a proactive approach to raise awareness of these recommendations to professional sporting codes.

The Government **agrees in principle** with the recommendations 10 and 11.

The Concussion and Brain Health Position Statement 2024, developed by the ASC, brings together the most contemporary evidence-based information and presents it in a format that is appropriate for all stakeholders to adopt. The 2024 Position Statement is a national guide relating to current best practices for prevention, recognition, and management of sport-related concussion, underpinned by the latest contemporary evidence. It should not be interpreted as a guideline for clinical practice or legal standard of care. Healthcare practitioners are the appropriate authority to make decisions on an athlete's return to play to optimize recovery and wellbeing for the individual. The Position Statement is intended to ensure that participant safety and welfare is paramount when dealing with concussion in sport.

The Government **agrees** that there should be specific guidance for longer stand down periods where there are multiple concussions within a short time frame. The precise circumstances are highly variable and therefore involvement of an experienced clinician is crucial. The ASC's 2024 Position Statement, including the Australian Concussion Guidelines

for Community and Youth Sport, provides updated return to play protocols, and additional information for circumstances of multiple concussions, adaptable across all sports for both children and adults that have incurred a concussion or suffered head trauma. The Australian Concussion Guidelines for Community and Youth Sport also bring alignment to concussion protocols in youth and community sport across Australia, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand. The 2024 Position Statement also includes the latest evidence presented by the Concussion in Sport Group at the 6th International Consensus Conference on Concussion in Sport held in Amsterdam in October 2022.

Key theme: Injury support

Recommendation 12

The committee recommends that professional sporting codes and players associations consider ways for a best practice model to provide ongoing support, financial and otherwise, to current and former players affected by concussions and repeated head trauma.

Recommendation 13

The committee encourages professional sports organisations to ensure their athletes have insurance coverage for head trauma. The committee also encourages state and territory governments to engage with professional sporting organisations to explore how the general exclusion of professional sports people from various state and territory workers' compensation schemes could be removed. The committee envisages that such a review should, amongst other things, assess the financial impact such a reform would have on the various sporting organisations across Australia.

Response:

The Government **notes** these recommendations.

The Government does not have responsibility for the matters outlined in these recommendations. The Government will support a proactive approach to raise awareness of these recommendations to professional sporting codes and further discuss with state and territory governments.

The ASC's Concussion in Australian Sport website contains the Concussion and Brain Health Position Statement 2024, including the Australian Concussion Guidelines for Community and Youth Sport, and provides information and resources which are publicly available. Since the release of the ASCs updated Concussion and Brain Health Position Statement in February 2024, many sporting organisations have reviewed the updated information and confirmed they are actively implementing changes to their processes in alignment with the ASC's position.