



Australian Government

Department of Health
and Aged Care

Inquiry into Concussions and repeated head trauma in contact sports

Submission from the Department of Health and Aged Care
to the Senate Community Affairs Committee

16 February 2023



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Introduction

The Department of Health and Aged Care (the department) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the *Inquiry into Concussions and repeated head trauma in contact sports*, and the Senate Community Affairs Committee.

The Office for Sport within the department is responsible for providing support and policy advice to the Minister for Sport, including new policy development and implementation, appointments, international engagement and sports diplomacy, delivery of commonwealth government sports grants, portfolio agency support, and coordinating Australian Government support for the staging of major international sporting events.

Australian Government interests are to encourage greater participation in sport by all Australians and contribute to a competitive, sustainable, and clean sports sector, based on the pursuit of excellence, integrity, and leadership. Sport also assists to achieve broader health, social, economic, and cultural outcomes.

The Office for Sport, within the department, maintains regular engagement with portfolio agencies and similar entities including the Australian Sports Commission (ASC), Sport Integrity Australia, the National Sports Tribunal, and the Australian Sports Foundation to facilitate effective communication and coordination. The ASC currently lead work on concussion and repeated head trauma for the sport portfolio. The ASC is making a separate submission given their leadership in facilitating research and development in relation to sport, sport science and sports medicine.

We recognise the growing concern in Australia and internationally about the incidence of sport-related concussion, as well as the potential long-term consequences of multiple concussions and the health ramifications for athletes. There has also been increased focus on the importance of diagnosing and managing the condition promptly, safely, and appropriately.

This submission outlines the department's policy and program levers / mechanisms which aim to prioritise the health and safety of all sport participants, including the development of research to improve understanding of sport-related concussions.

Response to the Inquiry Terms of Reference

[The guidelines and practices that contact sports' associations and clubs follow in cases of player concussions and repeated head trauma, including practices undermining recovery periods and potential risk disclosure](#)

In 2014–15 the department provided \$70,000 to the ASC to formulate a Concussion in Sport Position Statement and associated resources in collaboration with the Australian Medical Association, the Australasian College of Sport and Exercise Physicians and Sports Medicine Australia, with the aim to ensure participant safety and welfare is key when dealing with concussion in sport.

In 2017, the department provided the ASC with further funding of \$25,000 to maintain and update the Position Statement and related resources produced as part of the Project.



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In 2021, the department provided an additional \$105,000 to the ASC, as part of the Concussion and Brain Health Project 2021-24, to conduct a comprehensive update of the 'Concussion in Sport Australia: Position Statement'. Further information regarding the Project will be discussed below.

The position statement currently endorses a risk minimisation approach to the recognition and management of concussion, promoting 'if in doubt, sit them out' to sporting organisations. It brings together free, contemporary, evidence-based information and resources on concussion for athletes, parents, teachers, coaches, and medical practitioners. Further information is available online at www.concussioninsport.gov.au.

The long-term impacts of concussions and repeated head trauma, including but not limited to mental, physical, social and professional Impacts

Concussion and Brain Health Project 2021-24

In 2021, the Government provided an additional \$340,000 for the ASC to deliver the Concussion and Brain Health Project, with the aim of improving the understanding of, and evidence base for, the relationship between SRC and long-term brain health. The funding comprises of two components:

- \$105,000 towards a comprehensive update of the 'Concussion in Sport Australia: Position Statement' and associated education resources, with a focus recent scientific evidence regarding the links between SRC and long-term brain health.
- \$235,000 for the implementation of The Retired Elite Level Athletes' Brain Health Research Program to address current gaps in research, including research into 'Brain Health of Retired Elite Level Men and Women Collision and Non-Collision Sport Athletes'.

The Retired Elite Level Athlete Brain Health Research Program supports collaboration with the University of Newcastle and the University of Canberra (including in-kind contributions) to implement the Retired Elite Level Athlete Brain Health Survey and examine the brain health of retired elite level men and women from collision and non-collision sports. The project involves extensive psychological tests, cognitive testing, somatosensory assessments, and multi-modal experimental brain imaging.

The long and short-term support available to players affected by concussion and repeated head trauma

As a policy agency the Department does not provide specific supports for athletes. However, the Australian Government is investing in community-based mental health services to increase accessibility for all Australians to mental health care that addresses a broad range of social, physical and emotional needs. This includes:



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Head to Health adult mental health centre and satellite network

These services can be accessed by individuals affected by concussion and repeated head trauma in contact sports, and their families.

Head to Health centres and satellites provide a safe and welcoming place for adults to access mental health information, services and supports delivered by multidisciplinary care teams over extended hours, without needing a prior appointment or paying a fee. This includes immediate support and follow-up for people presenting in crisis, as well as short to medium term care for people with moderate to severe mental health needs.

Individuals and their carers can also call Head to Health on 1800 595 212 (between 8.30am-5pm weekdays) if they need mental health and wellbeing support. By making a free call, Australians can speak with a mental health professional who will take the time to understand their individual circumstances and connect them to the best local mental health service to meet their needs. Individuals can also visit [Head to Health online](#) to access digital mental health resources from trusted providers. More information about Head to Health services is available at www.headtohealth.gov.au/supporting-yourself/head-to-health-services.

headspace

These services can be accessed by young people affected by concussion and repeated head trauma in contact sports.

headspace is the primary national platform for provision of services to young people aged 12-25 experiencing, or at risk of, mild to moderate mental illness. The network of headspace services provides holistic care in four key areas - mental health, related physical health, substance misuse and social and vocational support.

Services are free or low-cost and can also be accessed virtually through eheadspace (available at <https://headspace.org.au/>).

The location and contact details for physical headspace services is available at <https://headspace.org.au/headspace-centres/>.

Other supports

The Australian Government funds Primary Health Networks (PHNs) to commission regionally appropriate mental health services that respond to a range of mental health needs, from early intervention for mild and moderate conditions to more severe forms of mental illness.

As part of the 2021-22 Budget, \$9.3 million over two years was provided to SANE Australia for a pilot of specialised digital mental health services and interventions. The pilot aims to improve access to mental health services for people for whom mainstream services may be challenging, including those with co-occurring conditions such as an acquired brain injury as a result of concussion or repeated head trauma. The pilot is currently available in 13 Primary Health Network regions.



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Through the pilot, SANE Australia delivers a range of individual and group based digital mental health services, care coordination and service navigation through a centralised multi-disciplinary team. There is also a self-guided service which provides drop-in channels as well as resources and forums for information and support.

The prevalence, monitoring and reporting of concussion and long-term impacts of concussion and repeated head trauma, including in First Nations communities

The department acknowledges that precise data on the incidence of sport-related concussion in Australia requires further collection and analysis. Potential limitations to obtaining accurate data on incidence include lack of recognition of symptoms, under-reporting by athletes and failing to seek medical advice. These barriers provide further impetus to develop innovative and evidence-based research and resources to support those affected by sport-related concussions.

The ASC and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare are leading the development of a National Sport Injury Database (the Database). The department is a member of the National Sports Injury Database Steering Committee. The 2022-23 Budget provided \$2.8 million over four years for the ongoing development of the Database. When established, the Database will allow for analysis of sport injuries trends, including concussion, which can be utilised by sporting organisations alongside provision of the latest evidence for treatment and prevention. The Database will aim to keep participants safe and identify areas where further initiatives are required to support the prevention of injuries and development of new treatments.

Other related matters

Medical Research Future Fund

The Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) provides grants to support health and medical research, improve health outcomes, quality of life and health system sustainability. Through the MRFF, \$50 million has been committed over 10 years to the Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) Mission to support research designed to improve the lives of all Australians who experience mild, moderate, and severe TBIs. The goal of the TBI Mission is to better predict recovery outcomes after a TBI, identify the most effective care and treatments, and reduce barriers to support people to live their best possible life after TBI.

The TBI Mission is guided by the [Roadmap](#) and [Implementation Plan](#) (publications available at www.health.gov.au/our-work/traumatic-brain-injury-mission/), key documents developed by the TBI Mission Expert Working Group to advise the Minister for Health and Aged Care on the strategic priority areas for research investment through the Mission. Sports concussion has been identified as a priority area for investment through *Priority Area 3.2* in the Implementation Plan on reducing inequalities in TBI treatment and care. Research projects funded under this priority area will identify and quantify variations in access to effective TBI treatment and care for mild and moderate to severe TBI. The approaches must



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include focus on vulnerable populations, including but not limited to people with sports concussion.

Since its inception in 2015, the MRFF has invested \$7.5 million in 6 grants with a focus on concussion research, primarily through the TBI Mission, including:

- \$3 million awarded to Professor Melinda Fitzgerald at Curtin University for the project “AUS-mTBI: designing and implementing the health informatics approaches to enhance treatment and care for people with mild TBI”. The AUS-mTBI national consortium will build online platforms including an App, to facilitate collection of mild TBI data from people across Australia. The team will analyse that data and identify the factors that predict optimal outcomes. The team will then feed this information back into their platforms, to create an accessible, evidence-based resource to guide care and improve outcomes for people with mild TBI.
- \$1 million awarded to Professor Biswadev Mitra at Monash University for the project “INFORMED: INtegrative approaches For Optimizing Recognition, Management and EDucation of concussion at the community sports level”. This program aims to improve management of sports concussion through establishment and evaluation of a telephone advice line for sports concussion, trial of a novel telehealth approach to diagnosis and treatment of concussion, (2) evaluating an innovative, multidisciplinary treatment strategy for debilitating persistent post-concussion symptoms and (3) creating new knowledge and developing blood and imaging biomarkers for the diagnosis of concussion.

Next Steps

The department prioritises the health and safety of all Australians who engage in sport. Developed in collaboration with the sporting sector and key medical professionals, the department’s approach to mild TBI and sport-related concussions strives to educate and empower the community to create safe and inclusive environments where all sport participants can thrive.

It is clear that investment in physical and mental health is essential to maintaining our longstanding and passionate sporting culture in Australia and the nation’s health. Moving forward, the department will continue to support research to inform evidence-based treatment and prevention, and strive for Australia to have a more comprehensive understanding of these injuries, so sporting organisations can make informed updates to safety standards and procedures.