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Why are Canadian universities blocking concussion research?

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Before 22-year-old Ohio State University football player Kosta Karageorge committed suicide two weeks ago, he texted his mother Susan: "I am sorry if I am an embarrassment but these concussions have my head all fucked up." How many more deaths and serious head traumas must occur before real change occurs?

For a century, thoughtful leaders have been pointing to the unnecessary dangers of injury in sport. In 1976, Ontario attorney-general Roy McMurtry worked to criminalize the violence in professional hockey by charging Dan Maloney with assault to cause bodily harm after a fight. In 1905, Theodore Roosevelt said that if football could not put an end to on-field brutality, then he would abolish the game with an Executive Order. In 2014, former professional athletes in football and hockey are litigating in class-action suits which demand accountability for injuries suffered.

Recent studies have proved conclusively that hits to the head during sport can have short and long term effects on our young athletes. Studies by the Hockey Concussion Education Project have also shown that athletes under-report their injuries because they want to keep playing and that many coaches are biased or not well-enough informed to use protocols that protect athletes when they are injured.

If we as a culture want to advance the public health issue of brain injuries in sport, we must break through the stubborn resistance to change by using current knowledge.

If we do not act on this knowledge, we are responsible for the subsequent injuries that our youth suffer. We cannot claim that we do not know. We know. We know that we must change.

Let me illustrate the cultural inertia we are up against.

This year, I led an interventional initiative with the Hockey Concussion Education Project (HCEP) that would involve nine Canadian universities and 425 male and female student athletes. The study would prospectively evaluate the effects that physical laws (fewer players on the ice, five against five versus six on six) have upon concussion incidence. One half of all league games would be played with five-on-five players and the other half would be played traditionally with six-on-six players. The difference in concussion incidence between these two groups would be calculated. It would combine non-biased physician observation with advanced MRI imaging and analysis. The research team was comprised of experienced international researchers based at Dalhousie University, Western University of Canada, Harvard University, Brigham and Woman's College Hospital, Massachusetts General Hospital.

The proposed intervention project was based upon the fundamentals of the HCEP Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) 2011-12 varsity hockey study. This study demonstrated an epidemic number of concussions, as well as pioneering Harvard based evidence of acute and chronic brain injury published in a seven part peer-reviewed series.

The Atlantic University Sport (AUS) universities of Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) were asked only to provide their teams. No funding from the universities was requested.

After strong interest and initial meetings, the AUS declared that reducing the number of players was "off the table." No explanation other than "the iron has gone a bit cold on the idea" was offered.

Direct queries to the nine university presidents were met with one single response, nine months after it was first proposed to the AUS executive director. Their decision was not to participate, without providing any rationale or suggestion of further engagement.

What could possibly prevent us from wanting to protect the health of our university students by reducing players on the ice? What could possibly prevent us from wanting to study the effects of brain injury in a university? This is not sports as entertainment. This is university level sport for university level competition.

The proposed HCEP research was designed to provide proactive care by experts in the field, to further public health initiatives, and to protect young athletes who will become our future leaders.

Our university leaders refuse to engage. The subjects in this initiative are students who also happen to be athletes, and are under the direct responsibility of these institutions.

We cannot escape the fact that if we fail to act now to significantly change the structures of the games and sports that we play, we have also ethically failed our current and future generations.

I am calling for a response from university presidents across this country. Why will you not agree to try a simple change in hockey, players playing five on five, and to foster research that seeks to make hockey safer and protects the health of our bright, young athletes? Why will you not engage in a solution?