

School board launches review after rugby player dies after head injury

BY NECO COCKBURN, OTTAWA CITIZEN MAY 14, 2013 6:22 AM



Facebook photo of Rowan Stringer, 17, a John McCrae Secondary School student who died of an injury she suffered during a rugby game last Wednesday.

OTTAWA — The Ottawa-Carleton District School Board is to conduct a review into the death of a Grade 12 student at John McCrae Secondary School who suffered a head injury during a rugby match.

There are indications that it could lead to more communication about the need to recognize and manage head injuries in school sports, though director of education Jennifer Adams wouldn't say if the review would also look at whether rugby would continue to be offered as a sport for students.

"Those questions will be for a later date," Adams said on Monday, because officials were providing support to Rowan Stringer's friends, school and family.

Rowan, 17, died over the weekend after suffering a traumatic brain injury during a high school rugby game on Wednesday. Her family decided Saturday to take her off life support and to donate her organs, fulfilling her dream of helping children.

The Stringers were told Rowan struck her head while taking a hard tackle, her father, Gordon Stringer, said on Monday.

The family hadn't received autopsy information, but there was some indication Rowan had suffered another head injury in a match a few days before Wednesday's game and that might have played a factor in the progression of the second injury, Stringer said.

Stringer said he wondered whether more could be done to communicate the need for players or coaches to recognize, understand and talk about head injuries.

"You know how kids are. They want to go, they want to play, especially when they're competitive, and they're not going to go telling their coaches that they're not 100 per cent," he said.

Rowan had planned to go into nursing and wanted to help children in Africa, her father said. Knowing those goals made it easier when her family was faced with its difficult decision, he said.

Given her prognosis at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario on Saturday afternoon, the family decided to stop any further medical intervention and to donate her organs, Stringer said.

There was very small chance of recovery even if treatment continued, Stringer said, and even if Rowan made it through that, it was very likely that her quality of life would have been poor.

"We knew that she would never want to live like that, so that made our decision to go through the organ donation process very easy," Stringer said. "Even though it's a really hard time when you're going through something like this, it's important to think about something like that because something really good can come out of something so horrible that's happened to you."

Rowan had been accepted into the University of Ottawa for the fall and was to go into nursing. She planned to go to Africa to help children after she graduated, he said.

She had played ringette for about a dozen years and loved to sing — or “to try and carry a tune,” as her father put it. Like him, she had a tough time doing that, he said.

“She loved life,” he added.

And Rowan loved rugby, according to her father. She was in her second year with the high school team and was its captain. She also played with the Barrhaven Scottish Rugby Football Club last summer, Stringer said.

“She called her bruises her badges of honour. She’d post them on Facebook and was quite proud of the fact that she got banged up,” he said.

“We had no qualms about her playing at all.”

Rowan had played all three games during a tournament on May 3, Stringer said. She took “a bit of a knock to the head” during the second Friday game but stayed on the field and played a third match, he said.

After taking pain medication that night, Rowan woke up feeling fine the next day, Stringer said. She played another game on Monday, he said.

Stringer had heard from one of Rowan’s friends that she didn’t feel quite right on Tuesday but had planned to play anyway on Wednesday.

Adams said she spoke to Rowan’s father on Monday. He talked about Rowan’s previous head injury, she said, “and we talked about the possibility of the district doing some things to help as far as awareness of head injuries and also the awareness of organ donation.”

Information was posted to Adams’s blog on the district website on Monday, and the board also sent head injury information from CHEO to media.

“We know that this was part of regular play, and everything that we’ve seen so far would indicate that this was very much an accident,” Adams said.

“We’ll be reviewing this particular incident and trying to learn from it. Certainly, if one of the things that emerges is an overall awareness of head injuries and making sure that our students and staff and community members are aware of that, we will certainly work with our community partners” like CHEO, Adams said.

Rugby coaches take a three-hour “safe rugby” course that deals with injury-related issues, she said.

Adams offered the district’s condolences, calling it “a very challenging day” for students at Rowan’s school and across the district.

The district hasn’t faced similar sports-related deaths, but the area saw a tragedy in April of last year when Josiah Grant, a Grade 12 student at Smiths Falls District Collegiate Institute, died following a high jump practice in which he’d jumped too far over a safety pad and landed on his neck and shoulders.

John McCrae’s principal suspended sports activities at the school on Monday and Tuesday so that students could grieve, said Adams.

Friends passed along tributes to Rowan on Twitter and Facebook, calling her a leader and a great friend. Rugby Canada chief executive Graham Brown extended his organization’s “deepest sympathies and condolences.”

On its website, the school posted a message stating it was “extremely saddened” by the loss.

“Our school community is in mourning and together, we will support each other in this time of need. A crisis management team has been put in place to provide assistance, counselling and other support to students and staff to assist them in their healing process,” it stated.

Rowan is survived by her father, her mother, Kathleen, and sister Cassie, 20. Funeral arrangements were not complete.

Kathleen Stringer posted messages on Facebook on Monday saying that Rowan had changed the lives of several people through her organ donation. Her kidneys, lungs and pancreas went to Toronto and her liver was sent to London, she wrote.

Rowan's heart stayed in Ottawa, "just where it should be," her mother wrote.

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RECOGNIZING CONCUSSIONS

OTTAWA — The Ottawa-Carleton District School Board distributed on Monday a CHEO fact sheet about concussions. Someone does not need to lose consciousness to have had a concussion, it says, and a person could have some of these problems following such an incident.

Thinking problems:

- Not knowing where he or she is, or the time, date, or period of the game.
- Not remembering what happened before or after getting hit.
- Being confused.
- Having been knocked out.

Complaints:

- A headache.
- Dizziness.
- Feeling "dazed" or "stunned."
- Seeing stars or flashing lights.
- Seeing double or blurred vision.
- Ringing in the ears.
- Feeling sleepy.

— Stomach pain or nausea.

Other problems:

— Poor coordination or balance

— Having a blank stare or seeming “glassy eyed.”

— Throwing up.

— Slurred speech.

— Being slow to answer questions.

— Not playing as usual.

— Having trouble concentrating.

— Being easily distracted.

— Showing strange or inappropriate emotions (laughing, crying or getting mad too easily.)

Signs and symptoms of a concussion often last for a week to 10 days but may go on much longer, CHEO says, and it can take many weeks or months to heal some injuries. It may also take longer for someone to heal if he or she has had a previous concussion, it says.

“Rest is the best treatment, because it allows the brain to heal itself,” the fact sheet states. Going back to activities too early can cause symptoms to come back and stay longer