Exploring Collegiate Football Players’ Knowledge of, and Attitudes Towards Concussions: Implication for the Design of Educational Interventions

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An athlete’s ability to recognize signs and symptoms of a concussion is important for them to appropriately seek medical attention (Delany et al., 2002). Thus, a first step towards developing policies and interventions designed to better manage the concussion issue is to understand athletes’ existing knowledge of this injury. For example, if an athlete suffers from multiple concussions or experiences head impacts before full recovery from the first impact, there can be major detrimental effects on health. Athletes that return to play too soon may experience increased susceptibility to concussions as well as more severe concussions, prolonged period of concussive symptoms, and secondary impact syndrome (swelling on the brain that can lead to coma or death) (McCrea et al., 2009; Meehan et al., 2011). Furthermore, there are many long-term health risks associated with concussions, such as chronic depression, (Holsinger et al., 2002) early onset of Alzheimer’s diseases, early onset of Parkinson’s disease (Tsai et al., 2002), chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), and chronic neurocognitive impairment (CNI) (Harmon et al., 2013). In sum, these types of head injuries have serious health consequences. While knowledge is arguably necessary for athletes to seek medical attention, it is an insufficient condition for them to do so. Athletes engage in a host of behaviors to hide and trivialize the extent of injuries (Young, White, & McTeer, 1994). Nixon (1993) argues that athletes are engaged in a “culture of risk” whereby athletes are encouraged to accept risk-taking in sport and minimize the consequences associated with injury. Sport managers tasked with developing policies and interventions to safeguard athletes’ health must take into account the social environment and attitudes that athletes have towards injury. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to assess collegiate football players’ knowledge of and attitudes towards concussions. This study is relevant to the topic of sport management because of the topical nature of the concussion issue to sport. As more is learned about the dangers of head trauma managers must device policies and interventions that will encourage individuals to take appropriate action when signs and symptoms of concussions are present. This study will provide insights in the ways in which this issue should be approached.

Review of Literature

Concerns over concussions have increased in recent years and the media frequently covers this issue. However, the science is still evolving and even among sport practitioners (e.g., team doctors and physiotherapists) there are many misconceptions over the diagnosis and management of concussions (Malcolm, 2009). Yet the prevalence of concussions in contact sports, such as football, is alarming. For example, Delaney et al. (2002) report that among a sample of Canadian university football players, 70.4% indicated they had experienced concussions symptoms within the past year. Additionally, only 23.4% had realized that they suffered a concussion. Khurana and Kaye (2012) estimated that as many as 3.8 million concussions occur in sport in the USA each year. In high school football it is estimated that 15% of athletes suffer a concussion each session (McCrea et al., 2004) and yet it is expected that approximately 50% of all concussions go unreported or undiagnosed by a medical practitioner (Harmon et al., 2013). Also, collegiate football players typically receive up to 1400 head impacts each season (Crisco, et al., 2010), making the likelihood of experiencing a concussion, high. Due to the vast amount of players likely being concussed each year, it is critical that players, coaching staffs and medical staffs be able to recognize and appropriately manage concussions.

While it is important that athletes be knowledgeable of the signs and symptoms of concussions, this does not necessarily lead them to take appropriate action. For instance, football players are more likely than athletes in other sports to continue playing even when they have expressed concussion symptoms (Kurst et al., 2003). Moreover, athletes may not report a concussion because they do not believe it is serious or do not want to be removed from the game (McCrea, et al., 2004; Register-Mihalik et al., 2013). Additionally, in a survey study of football players’ reporting
behavior on concussions, a main reason for not reporting concussion symptoms was due to feelings of embarrassment (Register-Mihalik et al., 2013).

Nixon (1993) argues that these types of negative emotional responses to injury are the result of the culture of risk where athletes accept risk-taking as a part of playing and downplay the significance of pain and injury. Hughes and Coakley (1991) likewise suggest that these types of reactions to pain and injury are due to excessive over conformity to the “sport ethic”, which are the norms and values associated with sport. These include sacrificing for “The Game”, playing through pain, and not accepting limitations to performance. The culture of risk and the sport ethic arguably lead athletes to engaged in strategies to conceal pain and injury. Young et al. (1994) and McEwen and Young (2011) identify five ways in which athletes conceal pain and injury. These include hiding the injury, disrespecting the injury or treating it with irreverence, identifying the injury as unwelcome (particularly because it is poorly received by others), welcomed in that fighting through pain is lauded, and depersonalizing the injury. This latter aspect suggests that athletes engage in a mind-body dualism, whereby they separate the injury from the self. Men in particular isolate parts of the body and objectify them as not being part of themselves. However concussion injuries are central to the self – they are not part of the body that can be easily separated from one’s identity. Thus it is unknown in what ways athletes conceptualize and negotiate these types of injuries. Therefore, in this study collegiate football players are interviewed to understand their knowledge of, and their attitudes towards concussions. Moreover, insights into the ways in which concussions are conceptualized and the coping strategies that athletes employ when faced with concussion symptoms are investigated.

Method

Data collection for this study has started and the study will be completed prior to the NASSM conference. Fifteen semi-structured interviews will be conducted with male Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) football players enrolled at a mid-sized university. The rationale for the number of interviews adheres to recommendations for interview studies (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). The interview guide is designed to have participants discuss their background and introduction to football before then naturally leading into a discussion on injuries in general, and concussions specifically. During this portion of the interview the participants will be asked questions to determine the extent of their knowledge concerning concussions (i.e., how is it defined, what are the signs and symptoms, what are the appropriate treatment options and return to play guidelines). The interview will then explore the participants’ experience with concussions and probes will be asked to understand their attitudes towards concussions, the ways in which they conceptualize concussions, and the coping strategies they employ when faced with concussion signs and symptoms. All interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. Data analysis will follow guidelines outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2008). The researchers will be immersed in the data, will engage in memo writing, opening coding and axial coding to explore possible relationships among concepts and insights identified. Data analysis will be ongoing as data is collected and the research team will engage in periodic reflection on the insights obtained from the analysis. The concept of theoretical saturation will be used whereby the aim of data analysis will be to have well-developed concepts and insights, such that additional data reinforces existing result, but do not contribute to the development of new concepts or insights. The results from this study will inform the ways in which sport managers should design educational interventions designed to encourage athletes to appropriately report signs and symptoms of concussions and seek medical advice.