

Concussions in Sport: NFL Carrying the Ball Toward Change in Brain Injury Policy

Donna Hanrahan

Keywords: sport, concussions,

Concussions have long been the dominant subject of concern in the sports world and are a serious concern in public health. This August, the National Football League (NFL) settled a lawsuit brought by more than 4,500 players and their families. The plaintiffs accused the League of concealing information about the dangers of repeated hits to the head, including minor traumatic brain injury (mTBI), concussions, and most significantly, chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a degenerative brain condition similar to Alzheimer's disease. The \$765 million settlement will be available to all retired players with neurological problems, not just the plaintiffs. This settlement marks an important shift in policy not only for the NFL, but also for other contact sports at all levels of play.

As a part of the settlement, a \$10 million research fund will be established. The League will continue to modify its medical protocols for concussions and change its rules to make the game safer in light of new scientific research. One of the most promising sectors of research is the use of advanced information technology to develop safer helmets and high-tech sensors to detect injury. However, it remains to be seen whether these advancements will significantly reduce incidence or severity of concussions on the field.

Until relatively recently, the NFL has remained on the sidelines when it comes to brain injuries and their associated long-term neurodegenerative pathologies. In fact, the plaintiffs maintain that the NFL failed to properly warn players about how concussions could affect their brain functions after they retired until 2010. Further, they attest that the League did so despite available scientific evidence about the risks, thus failing to regulate the sport in a manner that would prevent brain injuries in accordance with this knowledge. The NFL denied knowingly misleading players about head injuries, maintaining that its concussion policies relied on the best science available at the time.

With millions of children and adolescents playing football in the United States alone each year, now is the time to push new policies over the goal line to avoid further concussion-related brain injuries like CTE. Further ethical and legal analysis of the NFL concussion litigation is necessary to determine its effect on the development of policies to ensure safer conditions for players.

"N.F.L. Agrees to Settle Concussion Suit for \$765 Million" by Ken Belson, August 29, 2013. The *New York Times*<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/30/sports/football/judge-announces-settlement-in-nfl-concussion-suit.html?smid=tw-share&r=1&pagewanted=all>