

The NFL Concussion Cover-up: Concealing Brain Damage in Football Players

The NFL, the most powerful sports entity in the Western Hemisphere, has covered up the known medical consequences of head injuries for decades. A central claim of the many lawsuits against the NFL is that the League deliberately concealed the risks of repeated head injuries to thousands of players. The litigation hinges on whether lawyers representing the players can show that the NFL committed fraud in misrepresenting the health risks of concussions in football. The evidence appears insurmountable: the NFL lied.

Dozens of former NFL players generally agree that there was nothing during their career that was routinely referred to as a concussion. The operative term was “getting your bell rung,” a somewhat innocuous sounding phrase that belied the reality of the danger and seriousness of the injury.

After “getting your bell rung,” the response from medical personnel, coaches and trainers was often “how many fingers am I holding up?” followed by an administration of a healthy dose of smelling salts and a trip back onto the field.

To be clear, a concussion is a traumatic brain injury that occurs inside the skull, resulting in the brain swelling, smashing or twisting, which leads to torn blood vessels, damage to brain cells and the severing of connections inside the body’s most complex organ. Any event resulting in loss of consciousness is considered medically to be very serious. So-called minor concussions resulting in temporary confusion, blurred vision, memory loss, nausea and amnesia have medically documented serious long-term neurological implications.

The NFL had an acknowledged duty to protect the players from head injuries. The NFL had a duty to alter the rules of the game and devise appropriate return to play criteria. The NFL further had a duty to educate players about the risks of these head injuries.

Did the NFL fulfill its duties? What did the NFL actually do?

The narrative that emerges from the lawsuits is not favorable to the NFL.

It appears that the NFL acted very much like the tobacco manufacturers whose long standing refusal to acknowledge a link between smoking and lung cancer represents one of the greatest health risk deceptions of all time. In the case of the NFL, it appears management decided that players with brain damage are bad press and bad for business. So a decision was made to not only to hide the nature of the problem, but to actively deny that there was a problem at all.

The NFL used its substantial power to deceive the players and the public through a cadre of paid experts to deny a link between concussions and long-term brain damage.

The NFL Covers up player concussions. How did it do this?

In the early 1990s there was mounting evidence that there were large numbers of brain damaged NFL players. Additionally, independent medical professionals including the American College of Sports Medicine and American Academy of Neurology began calling for football rule changes and player head injury education.

The NFL decided to act, but not to protect players. The NFL began a decades long campaign of misinformation in 1994 by forming the Mild Traumatic Brain Injury Committee (MTBI).

Although the ostensible purpose of this group was to improve player safety and advise on rule changes, the group became a tool for the NFL to evade and conceal medical science. The MTBI essentially became a propaganda arm of the NFL's disinformation campaign about the risks of head injuries.

For starters, the MTBI group was headed from 1994-2007 by a Dr Elliot Pellman, a rheumatologist who lacked any medical training, background, experience or education relating to concussions, brain injuries or neurology.

Dr Pellman became notorious as the spokesman who said its ok to play in the NFL after a concussion. According to an ESPN report, Pellman was very selective in his use of injury reports in reaching his conclusions, and Pellman omitted large numbers of players from the league's own concussion study. Additionally, Pellman's findings contradicted nearly all other scientific studies into the effects of concussions. It was only after Dr. Pellman came under withering criticism by ESPN documenting his faulty methodology that the NFL removed him.

For over a decade Pellman and his group published numerous articles in medical journals at odds with years of existing medical research. The conclusions reached by these "studies" were often bizarre and at variance with all accepted medical opinion on the subject of concussions. For example, in January 2005, Pellman wrote that returning to play after a concussion "does not involve significant risk of a second injury either in the same game or during the season."

In a published article in 2006 Pellman wrote, "Because a significant percentage of players returned to play in the same game [after suffering a concussion] and the overwhelming majority of players with concussions were kept out of football related activities for less than one week, it can be concluded that mild traumatic brain injuries in

professional football are not serious injuries.”

In addition to its own publications, the NFL funded MTBI group attacked independent studies of football related concussions and those showing brain damage in NFL players. The NFL funded MTBI group actively sought to suppress studies with unfavorable conclusions.

When Dr. Bennet Omalu examined the brains of deceased NFL players and discovered evidence of brain damage in a pioneering study, the NFL group attempted to have the article withdrawn from Neurosurgery and to stop its publication. Dr. Omalu was subsequently hounded by the NFL and was forced to resign his medical position at a prominent hospital. He has now sued the NFL for defamation.

In addition to publishing studies of dubious value showing NFL head injuries to be minor issues, and seeking to block publication of studies showing evidence of brain injuries in NFL players, the NFL's misinformation unit transmitted misleading information directly to players. In pamphlets issued as late as 2007, the NFL was advising players thus: “Current research with professional athletes has not shown that having more than one or two concussions leads to permanent problems... It is important to understand that there is no magic number for how many concussions is too many.” This passage is devoid of any logic or scientific basis.

Thus the NFL did not play a passive or merely unhelpful role in ignoring head injuries, it was actively engaged in fraud and deception. The NFL actively sought to cover-up and contradict medical evidence about concussions to make money. The NFL fed the players nonsense and made false assurances that head injuries are “part of the game” and everything would be ok.

Thousands of former players suffer the consequences of this deception. These injured players were misinformed about the risks, and they were lied to. These players medical conditions went undiagnosed and medical treatment ignored. This is not a case of, as the NFL would have it, “Those are tough guys and they knew the risks...” This is case where the NFL failed in its duties on a systematic massive scale to its players, the thousands of now brain-damaged men.