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SSAC vigilant on youth concussions, lawmakers told

By [Phil Kabler](#)

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- As medical science makes rapid advances in understanding the long-term health risks of multiple concussions for athletes, the state Secondary Schools Athletics Commission has been a pacesetter in promoting rules to protect players, state lawmakers were told Tuesday.

"This is the fastest-growing area of medical knowledge at the moment," Dr. Richard Vaglienti, assistant professor of neurosurgery at West Virginia University, told a legislative interim committee on education. "What's known about concussion is growing by leaps and bounds."

He said what's being learned is disturbing: Concussions, once considered a minor setback for athletes, can have serious long-term implications, up to chronic traumatic encephalopathy.

CTE is a degenerative brain disease caused by multiple head traumas, resulting in dementia, depression and death at relatively young ages.

WVU, under Dr. Julian Bailes, has been a leader in research regarding CTE in athletes, particularly football players.

Vaglienti said sports associations, including the NFL and NCAA, have made changes in rules for treating concussed players, but said advances in that field of medicine are occurring so rapidly it's hard to keep pace.

"We're learning so much so fast that by the time we make a change, it's already outdated," Vaglienti said.

Meanwhile, WVSSAC football clinician Mike Webb told legislators the commission has been ahead of the NFL and NCAA in adopting rules changes intended to protect student athletes.

That includes a return-to-play protocol enacted this year, he said. That protocol mandates that any athlete showing signs or symptoms of concussion may not play or return to practice until he is evaluated by a health-care professional, and then completes a six-step progression of tests to determine if he is ready to return.

"We can't prevent all concussions, but with the information we have, we know how to treat concussions to prevent second-impact syndrome," Webb said.

Second-impact syndrome is a serious medical condition that occurs when a person suffers a second brain concussion before fully recovering from an initial concussion. Beyond immediate health risks, second-impact syndrome is believed to be a contributing factor in CTE.

Webb said the WVSSAC has also taken steps to reduce helmet-to-helmet contact, which contributed to 63 percent of all football concussions in 2009.

In 2007, the commission expanded designations for illegal helmet contact, which carries a 15-yard unsportsmanlike conduct penalty and possible ejection for the offending player.

WVSSAC Executive Director Gary Ray said coaches, officials and school administrators are being instructed to follow the motto "When in doubt, sit them out" regarding possible concussions.

"We're going to stay kid-focused," he told the committee. "We're going to make sure we make it as safe for our kids as possible."

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