

2023 ANNUAL REPORT AND QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

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CONCUSSION
AUSTRALIA

Our year in brief

- Our first year of operations have seen many people attend our workshops (across multiple cities and schools), support groups, or correspond directly with us seeking guidance for them or their loved ones.
- We gave evidence to the Senate Inquiry and have subsequently released our Official Response.
- Thousands of people have visited our website, with thousands more viewing our newsletters and emails.
- Hundreds of thousands of people have heard our radio interviews on air, with the pinnacle of that being with Andy Park on ABC Radio National at prime time.
- Continued collaboration with other like organisations, notably Brain Injury Australia.
- Multiple meetings with politicians, staffers, department officials, ministers and shadow ministers on all sides of the fence in multiple states and territories seeking action on concussion.
- Despite extensive efforts, many of the sports governing bodies refused to engage or speak with us, and we invite them to see us as an opportunity and not as a threat.
- Several esteemed, independent and world leading concussion management doctors continue to serve on our medical advisory committee.
- Cases continue to proceed through the courts and coronial inquests, which should serve to provide further assistance to society and the sporting bodies as to the risks and management approaches that are required at law with respect to concussion.

Official Response launched

In November 2023, Concussion Australia launched its official response to the Senate Inquiry into concussion and repeated head trauma in contact sport. This was circulated to all ministers and shadow ministers for sport, and later to the health and education portfolios. The key points to our response and our recommended strategy include the introduction of Acts of Parliament (by all State governments) that regulate concussion (which includes making education mandatory for certain parts of the community), improving data and making insurance mandatory (or otherwise with an appropriate indemnifier) for all sporting clubs at all levels. As a result of this, we have arranged or had several meetings with political leaders across Australia.

Robina State High School Workshop

On 27 October 2023 our team travelled to Robina State High School on the Gold Coast to conduct a concussion education workshop with all of the staff in their PE department. As with our previous workshops, we found:

- Every single attendee felt more prepared to deal with concussion after attending our workshop;
- 3/14 attendees had been provided with concussion education in the past, and each of those attendees felt more prepared to deal with concussion after our workshop.
- The group cumulatively thought that they had a total of 19 concussions between them, and only 2 of those concussions had been assessed by a hospital or medical practitioner.
- 12/14 attendees did not think that sports governing bodies (both pre and post workshop) were doing enough to deal with the issue of concussion (at all levels). The one person who answered “yes” to this question changed their answer to “unsure” in the post workshop component of the survey.

Combat Sports changes

In a welcome sign that governments around Australia are listening to Concussion Australia, we were recently informed that the Combat Sports Act 2013 (NSW) will be amended to require all participants to undertake mandatory concussion and head injury training. Over the previous year we have had several meetings with the NSW Government and we have also provided (and continue to) feedback to the government about the bill. From our perspective, if concussion education is good enough to be legislated as mandatory for combat sports athletes, then that same principle needs to apply to all sports with a similar risk of head trauma. Similarly, a common sense approach to this issue would be to introduce an Act of Parliament that mandates objective and independent concussion education, such that every sport and its participants are covered. Watch this space, because Concussion Australia is about to turn a more intense focus to the regulation of combat sports in Queensland, which currently has no regulation at all.

Findings of Coronial Inquest into Shane Tuck

On 11 December 2023, the Victorian State Coroner (Judge John Cain) handed down his findings with respect to the death of Shane Tuck, a former Richmond Football Club AFL player (from 2004-2013) who was diagnosed with severe (High) CTE (Stage III) and passed away by suicide in 2020.

The inquest handed down 21 recommendations (and found that CTE is associated with concussion) that were informed by multiple hearings involving several high profile witnesses including Dr Robert Cantu and Dr Michael Makdissi.

Dr Cantu opined that (per Cain J) “the [current] approach to concussion by the AFL is not only a reasonable and proportionate framework for the protection of participants in training and playing Australian rules football but is state of the art”, though Dr Cantu directly noted in his expert report that ([125]):

- CTE risk is most precisely correlated not with the number of concussions sustained but rather with the amount of repetitive head trauma someone has accumulated and as such, he would find it appropriate for the AFL to address the issue of cumulative head hits and to diligently seek ways to reduce them when and wherever possible; and
- it would be prudent for the AFL to put in place rules and procedures which would greatly mitigate the total number of head impacts a player receives each year and consequently during their career.

The AFL took a contrary view to Dr Cantu, instead considering that “Dr Cantu’s [view] in relation to the appropriateness of the AFL [concussion] Framework to be a narrow construction and one that does not accurately account for its scope and effect.”

Judge Cain discussed the AFL’s \$25m in funding to its Brain Health Initiative (for higher level players), which unfortunately does not provide a single dollar to concussion education or prevention. On this point, Judge Cain found at recommendation 4 that:

The AFL in consultation with the ALFPA consider how to best improve player awareness and review its current educational material on concussion and repeated head trauma including the risk of CTE to expressly address:

- a) recognising the acute signs and symptoms of concussion and head trauma;*
- b) responding and managing concussion and head trauma; and*
- c) understanding the short and long-term risks of concussion and repeated head trauma.*

Further, in a relatively scathing portion of the inquest, Judge Cain strongly urged the AFL to do more work in the broader Australian rules football community with respect to educating the community about concussion, with a particular emphasis on the grassroots.

On this point, we note that the AFL has consistently ignored Concussion Australia's requests to engage, meet or otherwise.

Much of the inquest goes through the AFL's attempts at improving the current state of affairs, including its attempts to design helmets, usage of mouth guards with accelerometers, and baseline testing.

Concussion Australia's view is that if we have an educated community about concussion who understand the injury, risks, management and the medicine, then the need for other possible technological mechanisms significantly reduces and or may even disappear.

Accordingly, we implore our sporting bodies (and other bodies) to consider taking a similar view, and in light of the findings, we once again invite the AFL (and the AFLPA) to collaborate with Concussion Australia so that we can help it to help its own community.

As more coronial inquests unfold, Concussion Australia will continue to report on their findings, and depending on resources and the provision of those resources from governments and private donors, we may consider directly intervening in future proceedings.

Some people we have helped in the last three months

Concussion Australia often receives calls and emails from people seeking our assistance. These last few months some of those people included:

- A mother in Melbourne who has been living with PPCS for the last 4 years. We were able to refer her off for treatment with two to three esteemed people in Melbourne.
- The mother of a 14 yo who fell off her horse and who continues to live with severe PPCS contacted us for assistance. We provided a sounding board for her and referred her off to the appropriate places.
- A 69 year old woman who hit her head on a door and suffered a concussion, and who was living with a range of acute symptoms that were becoming chronic. We were able to support this lady through these symptoms including mental health symptomology that she had never experienced before.

2024 and beyond

In the coming weeks we will send out invites to several educational workshops across Australia including in Brisbane, the Gold Coast, Tweed Heads, Canberra and Melbourne. These will each be conducted prior to grassroots sporting season commencement. Beyond this, our advocacy work will continue within the confines of our resources, as will our media engagement, workshops at schools (and otherwise), and our support groups will continue on a monthly basis.

Bluntly, funding is a significant impediment to our operations. Until any government provides funding for us or concussion education, then we are unable to properly assist the community. We have attempted to speak with the sports governing bodies on multiple occasions about the provision of funding (or partnerships) such that they can show the community they are serious about this issue, but for the most part, many of those bodies will not engage with us and will not provide funding to us or towards concussion education.

As 2024 commences, we are optimistic that this is the year where proper change starts and continues, including proper allocation of resources to concussion as a whole (and not simply to research).