

DR. JULIO MARTINEZ-SILVESTRINI CALLS IT A PERFECT STORM OF ATTENTION.

When the National Football League had many high-profile players suffer concussions, the *New York Times* decided to investigate the issue. Meanwhile the U.S. military recognized that many young soldiers were suffering concussions during combat.



While it's certainly not good news that all these brain injuries are occurring, the publicity is having some positive effects. People are less likely to ignore the fact that concussions represent a serious health issue, and that treating them under the care of a trained medical professional can make a critical difference.

Martinez-Silvestrini, a staff physiatrist with Baystate Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation who is board certified in sports medicine, and Dr. Zachary Marowitz, a neuropsychologist at Baystate Medical Center, recently launched a sports concussion clinic in Springfield, providing comprehensive care to patients suffering from sports-related concussions.

In the U.S. each year, as many as 3 million concussions result from sports related injuries, with only 1 in 10 leading to proper medical care. This high number of untreated cases results in part because people don't know concussions can occur without a person losing consciousness. But the more common reason is that concussions have been viewed as something that can be shaken off without lasting ill effects.

A new law in Massachusetts requires players who demonstrate symptoms of concussion to get the permission of a qualified health care provider before returning to play. Young athletes in contact sports will also routinely undergo baseline cognitive testing to establish normal performance levels for comparison if one of these athletes later sustains a concussion.

This more aggressive approach comes as we become more aware that concussions have potentially dire consequences. Sometimes it seems only that an athlete is temporarily dazed. But then headaches might follow, ringing ears, and a sensitivity to light. A concussion can affect a number of brain functions, including memory, judgment, reflexes, speech, and balance. It can lead to an athlete becoming depressed, and may cause students to perform poorly in school.

The key to preventing this cascading of problems is giving the brain time to rest and heal. For a period of time determined by a physician skilled at these types of assessments, there should be little physical exercise and minimal hard mental work. Without adequate rest, recovery can take months, even years.

Dr. Darius Greenbacher, board certified in sports medicine and director of the Sports Medicine Program at Baystate Franklin Medical Center, knows how difficult it can be to have a young athlete complete the proper rest period.

"But the more I can help them understand what's happening in their brain, and the importance of complete recovery, the more buy-in I get," he says. "Many of these kids have known someone who's gotten 'dinged' and then is not doing so well in a class they used to get As in."

Baystate Franklin's Sports Medicine Program offers a comprehensive approach for concussion care. This includes computerized neurocognitive testing (ImPACT), proprioceptive assessment, coordinated return to play exertion testing protocols, and coordination with schools for safe return to sports and cognitive rest.

According to orthopedic surgeon Dr. Joseph Lellman, Baystate Medical Practices – Mary Lane Orthopedics, who serves as a high school team doctor, what often becomes critical is seeing that a young athlete does not suffer repeated concussions.

"There is what we call second-impact-syndrome, which can cause life threatening problems," he says. "If kids get put back into play too soon and their brain isn't recovered from a previous injury, they're much more prone to sustain another injury and that can have serious consequences. Kids have died from second injuries to the brain."

According to Marowitz, concussions occur in athletes of all types. "One of our motivations in starting this clinic is to help get these kids seen quickly," says Marowitz. "So many of them deal with the problem for so long, experiencing the depression or the inability to focus in the classroom, and it just doesn't have to be that way."

POSSIBLE SYMPTOMS OF A CONCUSSION

- Unconsciousness
- Dizziness
- Balance disturbance
- Confusion
- Ringing in the ears
- Headache
- Memory loss
- Difficulty speaking
- Sensitivity to light and/or noise
- Blurred vision
- Nausea/vomiting

If you suspect a concussion, get immediate medical care.

Baystate Medical Center's Sports Concussion Clinic, Springfield: 413-794-5555

Baystate Medical Practices – Mary Lane Orthopedics, Ware: 413-967-2577

Baystate Franklin Medical Center's Sports Medicine Program, Greenfield: 413-773-2220

Concussion Care

EXPERTS IN THE SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS

By Andrew Shanley