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SATURDAY ARGUS

### Taking the impact out of school rugby

#### Proactive: computer-based concussion testing

August 19, 2006

By Nicky Willemse & Melanie Peters



Schools throughout South Africa are taking proactive steps to make sure that they can detect serious head injuries, using a computer-based concussion testing programme used by the New Zealand rugby All Blacks and US football and ice-hockey leagues.

Cape Town schools are expected to become involved in the programme from next year.

Rhodes University neuropsychology specialist Professor Ann Edwards, heads the programme in South Africa. And it is registered with the Health Professions Council of SA.

She said ImPACT (Immediate post-concussion assessment and cognitive testing) used a video-game format to track memory, reaction time, processing speed and concentration.

Pupils complete the test before their sports season starts, establishing a baseline score. If they are concussed, they re-do the test, sometimes several times over a period of a few weeks - and these results are compared with the baseline data, to determine when they are fully recovered and can return to the sports field. The test is used in conjunction with a medical examination by a suitably qualified doctor.

Some schools have made it mandatory for all their rugby players. "Unfortunately, schools usually wait for an incident - like (that involving) Pretoria headboy Tommie Watson - before they get frightened and make the programme mandatory." In May, Watson of Gerrit Maritz High School in Pretoria, died of an undiagnosed brain haemorrhage when he returned to the rugby field two weeks after a concussion.

Edwards said Second Impact Syndrome, the result of a mild hit on top of an unrecovered one, was one of two dangers of a premature return to the field.

"The second danger is that if the brain does not sufficiently recover from a mild blow to the head, that person will gradually get brain damage over time."

Edwards said ImPACT was "individualised" compared with the "arbitrarily" drawn-up grades of concussion traditionally used.

"These state that a person suffering a brief concussion can go back on the field immediately. In more severe cases, they are on the bench for three weeks. In even more severe cases, they are out for the whole season."

Edwards said the generalised system meant there was a "danger of some people going back onto the sports field when they were not yet ready. The flip-side is that some athletes recover quicker and can return sooner."

A Cape Town based psychologist, Vicky Whitefield, is doing her doctorate in minor traumatic brain injury in high school contact sports players. She runs an imPACT programme from the Sports Science Orthopaedic Clinic in Newlands.

She said while it was too late to introduce the programme at city schools this year, they aimed to try to get schools involved before next year's rugby season.

She said more than 300 pupils had come to the institute and a large number of these were for her research. "The programme is very sophisticated. It really is accurate. It's like a flu jab, it prevents kids from going onto the field when they should not be there."

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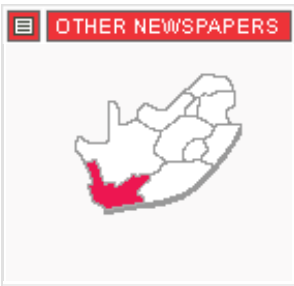
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Grahamstown's Kingswood College was the first school in the country to use the web-based programme. Schools, clubs and professional-level teams in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, were using the programme.

Grahamstown doctor Fred Oosthuizen, who is also Kingswood's medical officer, said: "More schools should get involved with the programme, to get proper post-concussion assessment. We have pulled one or two children out of rugby as a result of ImPACT."

Kingswood College director of sports, Graham Carlson, said the programme added one more element to the diagnosis and management of concussion and allowed schools to keep a tighter watch on their athletes.

However, he said the programme was voluntary at the school, because of the R150 to R250 subscription cost.

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