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Local High Schools Get Tech Help In Concussion Diagnosis

By: Seth Goldstein, The Bulletin

08/17/2007

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He has rubbed shoulders - and probably popped a few back into place - while working for the Philadelphia Eagles and Philadelphia Wings.

But even for someone like Mills, there's still one injury that even he needs help diagnosing and treating. In fact, it's an injury that even experts in the field are still trying to learn more and more about: concussions.

Bill Mills has probably seen every sports-related injury imaginable.

An athletic trainer at Malvern Prep for the past 21 years, Mills has treated everything from shin splints to dislocations to torn muscles.

He has rubbed shoulders - and probably popped a few back into place - while working for the Philadelphia Eagles and Philadelphia Wings.

But even for someone like Mills, there's still one injury that even he needs help diagnosing and treating. In fact, it's an injury that even experts in the field are still trying to learn more and more about: concussions.

"We'd be walking off the field into the locker room and the kid doesn't even remember why we were walking in," said Mills, describing a scene he has been a part of too many times at Malvern football games. "But these kids think they are so invulnerable that they think they can just go out and put their head into a kid when it's really not necessary to do that."

But now Mills is finally getting some help.

A computer program created to help diagnose concussions is now being used by more and more high schools across the nation, including Malvern.

The ImPACT test, developed by a group of concussion specialists in 1999, is a program designed to test a person's brain activity in regards to reaction time, memory, retention and concentration.

Through a 20-minute battery of tests that includes word identification exercises, picture recognition analysis and letter memorization, ImPACT helps trainers and doctors diagnose concussions and track and monitor recovery.

"Athletes may not be aware of the subtle symptoms of a concussion," said Mickey Collins, a neuropsychologist and assistant director of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center Sports Medicine Concussion Program who helped develop the program. "They may not want to report them because they want to go back out and play, or they may be scared they'll lose their spot on the team. This test helps coaches and trainers decide whether an athlete should be playing or not."

Ideally, schools administer the test before the start of the season, obtaining a baseline sample of each athlete's brain activity. If a player experiences concussion-like symptoms - dizziness, nausea, loss of balance, etc. - during the season, he or she will undergo the test again the following day and see how the results differentiate from the baseline. From there, the severity of the concussion and proper treatment can be determined.

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, between 1.4 and 3.6 million sports- and recreation-related concussions occur each year, with the majority happening at the high school level. And several studies estimate that at least 10 to 20 percent of all athletes involved in contact sports sustain a concussion each season.

"Especially in football, we have more concussions towards the end of the season when the kids seem like they're getting more tired," Mills said. "When their bodies get fatigued, they're more susceptible to concussions."

So who is using this program?

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On the professional level, 30 out of 32 NFL teams, including the Eagles, use the test. In MLB, the Phillies are one of 18 teams using it. The Flyers were one of the first NHL squads to utilize the program, and now the NHL has recently required all teams to do the same. On the high school level, Pennsylvania leads the country with 252 schools that are using the system to test for concussions. However, out of all of those schools, only 22 are located within the Philadelphia Metropolitan area, according to the ImPACT Web site.

"I think some of us are still looking for some data to see how it works," said Pat Manzi, head football coach at Bishop McDevitt and the moderator for Catholic League football. "I'd like to see more about it. How effective it is. If it's something worthwhile, we'd take a look at it."

Several schools, such as Malvern, will be using the system for the first time this year. Others, such as the three Central Bucks schools, have had the luxury of the testing for three years now.

So why the hesitation by so many local schools?

Money really isn't the issue.

Malvern, according to Mills, paid only \$400 for the software, which they installed directly on to their computer network. And the state government has recently established a grant program to help schools obtain the testing. Such programs have already been successful in Nevada, New Jersey, New York and Hawaii, Collins said.

The problem is time and personnel.

One test for one athlete can take anywhere from 20 to 30 minutes. And ideally, a school would want to test every athlete, not just those involved in the higher-contact sports. If a school has only one athletic trainer - and most schools don't employ one full-time - who is responsible for testing as many as 500-600 athletes a season, the time just doesn't exist to get that done unless students are pulled out of class. Administrators don't necessarily want to take away from classroom time.

"We had 125 kids in the program and we rolled them all through in a day," said Glen McNamee, head football coach at Central Dauphin in Harrisburg, whose team underwent the baseline testing last week. "This is something we needed to do. I've been hearing more and more about research related to concussions and how bad they can be. Not even just short-term, but the long-term effects they have on people. It's kind of scary. It's better to be safe than sorry."

ImPACT has put a test on its Web site, but problems still arise in regards to monitoring the athlete during the exam.

As of now, no high school league in the Philly area mandates that concussion testing be a part of every sports season. And the Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association, the organization that oversees the majority of high school athletics in the state, has not fully discussed implementing the testing either, although it may be on the docket the next time its Sports Medicine Advisory Committee meets, according to PIAA Assistant Executive Director Melissa Mertz.

But every new idea has to start somewhere, and this may be only the beginning.

"There's a real, true need for this," Collins said. "We've learned more about concussions in the past five years than the previous years combined. Up until then, we really didn't have any objective way of managing them."

Now, this doesn't mean that the old-fashioned method of "How many fingers am I holding up?" will never be used again. Both Mills and Collins stressed that sideline evaluation is still a critical part to diagnosing concussions.

But the ImPACT system is another tool that can make the diagnosis and treatment of this possibly severe injury a little bit easier.

"This won't show if a kid is more susceptible to concussions than others," Mills said. "We recognize (concussions). We see them. We treat them. This will help us do that."

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