

1st March 2016

To:

Anne Longfield OBE, Childrens Commissioner for England
Professor Sally Holland, Children's Commissioner for Wales
Tam Baillie, Children's Commissioner for Scotland
Koulla Woasouma, Children's Commissioner for Northern Ireland
Dr. Niall Muldoon, Ombudsman for Children for Northern Ireland

Professor Dame Sally Davies, Chief Medical Officer for England
Dr Ruth Hussey OBE, Chief Medical Officer for Wales
Dr. Catherine Calderwood, Chief Medical Officer for Scotland
Dr Michael McBride, Chief Medical Officer for the Republic of Ireland

Rt Hon Nicky Morgan, Secretary of State for Education for England
Huw Lewis AM, Minister for Education and Skills in Wales
Rt Hon Angela Constance, Secretary of State for Education and Lifelong Learning for Scotland
John O'Dowd MLA, Minister for Education in Northern Ireland
Jan O'Sullivan, Minister for Education for the Republic of Ireland

Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt, Secretary of State for Health for England
Rt Hon Shona Robison, Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Sport in Scotland
Mark Drakeford AM, Minister for Health and Social Services in Wales
Simon Hamilton MLA, Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety in Northern Ireland
Leo Varadkar, Minister for Health for the Republic of Ireland

Rt Hon John Whittingdale, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport in England
Ken Skates AM, Deputy Minister for Culture, Sport and Tourism in Wales
Jamie Hepburn MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing & Sport in Scotland
Carál Ní Chuilín MLA, Minister for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in Northern Ireland
Paschal Donohoe, Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport in the Republic or Ireland.

Open Letter: Preventing injuries in children playing school rugby

We, the undersigned, are sport scholars, academics, doctors, and public health professionals, who have become increasingly concerned about the harms and risks of injuries to children playing school rugby.

Our concerns are as follows. First, rugby is a high-impact collision sport. Studies show that the risks of injuries for those aged under 18 years are high and injuries are often serious.

Second, many secondary schools in the United Kingdom deliver contact rugby as a compulsory part of the physical education curriculum from age eleven.

Third, the majority of all injuries occur during contact or collision, such as the tackle and the scrum. These injuries which include fractures, ligamentous tears, dislocated shoulders, spinal injuries and head injuries can have short-term, life-long, and life-ending consequences for children.

Fourth, head injury and concussion is a common injury and repeat concussion is more likely when a player has a history of a previous concussion. A link has been found between repeat concussions and cognitive impairment and an association with depression, memory loss and diminished verbal abilities, as well as longer term problems. Children take longer to recover to normal levels on measures of memory, reaction speed and post-concussive symptoms than adults.

Fifth, studies show that injuries from rugby can result in significant time loss from school. Rugby injury, disillusionment with the game and interference with education, are the most common reasons for children giving up rugby.

We are also concerned about the government's plan in England to increase participation in rugby in schools. Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 17), governments have a duty to inform children about risks of injury. Yet, in the absence of a comprehensive system for injury surveillance and primary prevention this cannot occur.

Also under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 19), governments have a duty to protect children from risks of injury: "States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment...". As a party to the Convention, the UK must ensure the safety of children.

These evidence-based concerns lead us to consider it necessary to remove the collision elements of the school game so that children play touch and non-contact rugby. Within your respective countries, we therefore request:

- a) the Chief Medical Officers to advise the Ministers and Childrens' Commissioners in accordance with the evidence;
- b) the Childrens' Commissioners to protect children from the risks of harmful contact in school rugby; and
- c) the Ministers to remove the tackle and other forms of harmful contact from school rugby.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Professor Eric Anderson
Professor of Sport and Masculinities
University of Winchester
ProfessorEricAnderson@gmail.com

Professor Allyson Pollock
Professor of Public Health Research and Policy
Queen Mary University of London
A.Pollock@qmul.ac.uk

Supporting Signatories

Professor Priscilla Alderson
University College London

Professor John Ashton CBE
Royal Society of Medicine

Professor Anne Bolin
Elon University

Professor David Birks
University of Winchester

Professor Joy Carter
University of Winchester

Professor Jay Coakley
University of Colorado

Professor Shaun M Filiault
River Valley Community College

Professor Patricia Griffin
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Professor Tansy Jessop
Southampton Solent University

Professor Simon Jobson
University of Winchester

Professor David Karen
Bryn Mawr College

Professor Michael Kimmel
Stony Brook University, New York

Professor Gill McInnes
St Mary's University

Professor Michael A Messner
University of Southern California

Professor Ken Muir
Appalachian State University

Professor John Nauright
University of Brighton

Professor Victoria Paraschak
University of Windsor

Professor Naomi Pfeffer
University College London

Dr. Jo Deakin
University of Manchester

Dr. Jenny Driscoll
Kings College, London

Dr. Judith Eling
ST in Public Health, London Deanery

Dr. Kjell E. Eriksson
Malmo University

Dr. Johannes Fuss
University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf

Dr. Angela Cora Garcia
Bentley University

Dr. Brian T. Gearity
University of Denver

Dr. Whitney Griffin
University of California Riverside

Dr. Spencer Harris
University of Colorado

Robin Ireland, MFPH
Health Inequalities Group

Graham Kirkwood
Queen Mary University of London

Dr. Melanie Lang
Edge Hill University

Dr. Jason Laurendeau
University of Lethbridge

Dr. Margaret McCartney
General Practitioner, Glasgow

Dr. Mark McCormack
Durham University

Dr. Rory Magrath
Southampton Solent University

Dr. Peter Millward
Liverpool John Moores University

Dr. Jeffrey Montez de Oca
University of Colorado

Professor John C Phillips
University of the Pacific

Professor Robert Pitter
Acadia University

Professor David Plummer
Griffith University

Professor Carl Stempel
California State University, East Bay

Professor Faye Linda Wachs
Cal Poly Pomona

Professor Lawrence Wenner
Loyola Marymount University

Dr. Adi Adams
University of Bath

Dr. Jason Arday

John Batten, MSc
University of Winchester

Dr. Catherine Brogan
University College London

Dr. Hazel Brown
University of Winchester

Dr. Rachael Bullingham
University of Worcester

Dr. JoAnn Buysse
University of Minnesota

Dr. J.A. Carter
Miami University

Dr. Sam Carr
University of Bath

Dr. Jamie Cleland
Loughborough University

Dr. Stewart Cotterill
University of Winchester

Dr. Christopher Morris-Roberts
University of Brighton

Dr. Ronald Mower
State University of New York

Dr. Polly Nyiri
General Practitioner, London

Dr. Craig Owen
St Mary's University

Dr. Nikesh Parekh
Brighton and Sussex Medical School

Dr. Catriona M. Parratt
University of Iowa

Dr. Joe Piggin
Loughborough University

Dr. Fritz Polite
Shenandoah University

Dr. Richard Pringle
University of Auckland

Dr. Charles Silverstein
Institute of Human Identity

Dr. Richard M. Southall
University of South Carolina

Dr. Stephanie Spencer
University of Winchester

Dr. Jane M. Stangl
Smith College

Dr. Sarah Teetzel
University of Manitoba

Dr. Michael Regan
Georgia State University

Dr. Steve Roberts
Monash University

Dr. Martin Roderick
Durham University

Dr. Katie Rodgers
Coe College