

Testimony for Public Hearing
“Concussions in Youth Sports: Evaluating Prevention and Research”
Energy and Commerce Committee
Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee
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Thank you Energy and Commerce Committee members and particularly Representative Murphy for allowing me to speak to this hearing today. I consider it an honor and a privilege to represent the millions of children that are in harms way as we debate their future health and wellbeing.

I am not a doctor or scientist. But I have experience. I have lived with and loved a person struggling with the disease Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, CTE. I have seen close-up the transformation of a beautiful, bright, energetic, loving young man into a reclusive, paranoid, depressed and angry person. It is heartbreaking.

My son Patrick Risha was a hometown hero in high school football. He grew up in an area that measured the worth of a man by his prowess and heart on the football field. He started just south of Pittsburgh with the Elizabeth Forward youth leagues when he was ten years old. He was not gifted with size or speed but nonetheless worked hard to become a great player, and through that achieved his dream to go to an Ivy League school. It is that work ethic and perseverance in a collision sport that ultimately killed him. Patrick took his own life at the age of 32.... But actually we have come to learn CTE took his life.

Patrick never played in the NFL. Patrick was like millions of children before and after him that just played for success in life. But throughout high school, prep school and Dartmouth College, our sweet, tough, young running back received enough sub-concussive blows to his head to essentially seal his fate. When he died, a newscaster friend of the family suggested he might have CTE. I had never heard of CTE before. I had heard about NFL players having brain issues but never dreamed it could have an effect at the level of a college player. When Patrick's autopsy revealed he had widespread CTE I was in shock and horror. How many other players like Patrick are there out there? How many other families are dealing with a loved one gradually coming unwired and have no clue what is happening? Not every grieving family has a newscaster friend saying the words CTE. For the sake of American families this has to change.....and we are grateful this committee is conducting this hearing to learn more about the disease and the impact on families and on our society.

People need to know that this disease is out there. That it can occur in youth and high school and college levels of collision sports. Families need to know what the symptoms are and how to address the disease. This has been hidden in plain sight for much too long. It was this realization that prompted our family and friends and the support of my husband, to form the Patrick Risha CTE Awareness Foundation and the website StopCTE.org. Sadly, I am not the only grieving loved one on this crusade. In March for Brain Injury Awareness Day here in the House twelve families were represented that lost loved ones to brain trauma and disease. Paul Bright, Eric

Pelly, Daniel Brett and Joseph Chernach only played football up to the high school level. Their moms and other families of CTE victims formed the Save Your Brain Campaign to bring attention to the need for protecting children in sports. Together with many other families (as the numbers grow), we will be returning to DC until we are sure that children are protected and safe.

No family wants their child to suffer with a disease that causes them to lose their mind slowly and with such anxiety and loneliness. Yet everyday parents are signing their kids up for youth collision sports. Our “Steelers Country” area in Pennsylvania supports a television show called “Friday Night Tykes” with young children bashing heads on national television. These parents don’t understand the horror that may face their child or they would not participate.

Since Roman times MEN have fought in arenas for sport and entertainment. Yet somehow we seem to have evolved to the point where we are now willing to put children into arenas and tackle each other for sport. We put them in the equivalent of cheap Halloween costumes and we ask them to be tough little warriors. We did it. And we were so proud when Patrick carried his team to victory. Sadly we lost a gifted young man before he ever had a chance to live his life. And gifted children all over this land are winning battles on the sports fields but sadly losing their chances for a happy, healthy, productive life.

If I had known the collisions my son endured were slowly killing him, I would have

stopped it. Any parent would who knows the truth would stop it. Parents need to be told the truth. Parents need to know:

- That 32% of amateur athletes in collision sports were found to have had CTE post mortem.
- Parents need to know that helmets and sports equipment are unregulated and may even add to the likelihood of brain trauma in children.
- Parents need to know that athletes that receive repetitive brain trauma before the age of 12 have significant changes in physiology, operations, and structure of the brain. So even if a child never gets CTE, he/she may still have done irreparable damage to the brain. Human brains are still developing until the age of 18 and sub-concussive blows to the head cause white matter changes, axon changes, and blood vessel changes, and these changes can be permanent.
- Parents need to know that recognizing a concussion in a child is often very challenging. Kids won't even tell you when they are tired, let alone tell you if they have vision problems, sensitivity to noise, trouble concentrating, or feel emotionally changed.
- Parents need to know that their child can develop CTE without ever receiving a concussion.
- Parents need to know that less than half of youth football coaches are well trained in concussion management. Coaches do know that the team plays better when the best players are on the field. So where is the incentive in the heat of competition to do the right thing at the right time?

Our Foundation created a brochure, "Flag Until 14" to help parents understand the key issues of CTE. We intend to place these brochures in every pediatrician office in the country. We have reached 62 practices so far. We have much more work to do. Heading the ball has recently been eliminated from youth soccer. Checking in hockey has been eliminated in youth leagues. Football needs to institute "Flag until 14", at the very least. (We would prefer Flag Until 50) Now the information is out there. Now we need to pay attention to it. At the very least, we need to protect those precious little brains. Right now children need us to help protect them.

There are those out there who would prefer parents didn't know about CTE. They will obfuscate the issue with unreasoned arguments. We've heard a few like "you can get a concussion riding a bike" or "you're turning our warriors into pansies" or "do you want them to sit and play video games for the rest of their lives?" When you've lost your son to CTE, and you understand how it is caused, these arguments are insulting, and almost evil. So for now, please let's just help protect the kids.

And what about the men and women who already have CTE? We believe that this silent epidemic may be playing out in millions of homes across this land. Families are burying loved ones all over this country thinking they died from suicide, drug addictions, PTSD, depression, ADHD, and irrational behaviors. Thinking that somehow something happened to change the person they loved, and feeling somehow that they failed them. Very few are linking these deaths to CTE.....

Maybe they don't know to ask. Maybe a doctor misdiagnosed the patient. Maybe the coroner is rushing to judgment. Maybe the behaviors in their loved ones changed so slowly that no one is linking it to previous military or sports history from so many years ago. Whatever the reasons, the silent epidemic continues. And we believe the magnitude of this horrific disease has yet to be discovered. Gunplay and murders are in the news every evening, and we always wonder how many of the perpetrators played collision sports or served in the military. Just as many suicides are NOT reported every evening because of the stigma attached to suicide. We muffle the fact that a reported 22 veterans a day commit suicide, and that suicides exceed homicides every year.

What also continues? Beautiful children are being placed in harms way through collision sports everyday. Families and loved ones are in turmoil. People are losing their lives. Mental health practices, drug addiction facilities, and suicide centers are on overload. Lawyers are filing lawsuits all over the place. Insurances are going up.

We also have some suggestions for better insight, research and ultimately help for victims and their families:

- The CDC death certificate needs to have a box to check if the victim played a collision sport, and in turn the possibility for death from CTE should be noted on the death certificate.
- The jails nation wide should do a study on how many inmates played a collision sport or were in the military. Rehab facilities should do the same.

- Mental health providers need trained to recognize and treat CTE
- No school or organization should field a collision sports team without a certified medical specialist on the field.

In my sons memory, we set our mission to increase awareness of the insidious disease, CTE, and to help parents make informed decisions about the safety and welfare of our children, and to provide a resource to promote greater understanding of the challenge we face dealing with this silent epidemic. This is a human tragedy of immense proportions, but we are small and need the help of everyone in the room and in the halls of Congress.

After we are done hearing everyone's testimony today we will know that children are in danger and need our help and that families are in crisis. Parents are receiving conflicting data and just don't know. We can't be the only doomsday placard holder in the street. Every person in this room now has the duty to save these children and families. CTE is 100% preventable. To do anything else is to be complicit to the problem and more families will suffer the pain we personally endure every day.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to be a voice for children.