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Washington's Lystedt Law: A Heads Up for Athletes and Physicians

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The Lystedt Law, also known as "When in Doubt, Sit Them Out," is designed to help prevent young athletes from returning to play too quickly after sports-related head injuries. Passed by the Washington State Legislature about a year ago, the law went into effect in July 2009. The law requires:

1. That young athletes and their parents or guardians sign a concussion and head-injury information sheet each year prior to playing.
2. The development of clear guidelines for school and club teams, as well as training for coaches and other sports officials.
3. That any young athlete suspected of sustaining a concussion or head injury must immediately sit out and may not return to play until he or she has been evaluated by and received clearance from a licensed health care provider trained in the evaluation and management of concussion.

Oregon recently passed a similar law, and many other states are soon to follow. Washington's clear and comprehensive law is a template for other states.

Maple Valley resident Zackery Lystedt, for whom the law is named, was just 13 years old in 2006 when he was allowed to return to play after hitting his head during a school football game. (Common practice is for high-level student athletes to be evaluated on the sidelines by a certified athletic trainer or team physician and then sit out the remainder of the game or practice with follow-up care from a family practice or ER doctor.) Collapsing at the game's end, Zackery was diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury. After emergency brain surgery, weeks in a coma and years of treatment and therapy, he's learned to eat and talk again, and is working on the muscles and skills needed to walk.

Naturopathic physicians have much to offer the families of young athletes in the evaluation and treatment of mild sports-related head injuries. Dr. Melissa Larson of Ballard Neighborhood Doctors explains: "Assuming a normal exam and/or CT scan, treatment is generally aimed at reducing symptoms, inflammation and associated muscle strains that occur with injury. Athletes should not return to sports until all symptoms are clear, and memory and concentration have returned to normal, including after exercise provocation. Naturopathic medicine brings a huge sea of treatment options for these patients. Naturopathic physicians may employ homeopathics, herbal remedies, nutrient therapies and a host of physical medicine modalities such as craniosacral, massage, spinal manipulation and acupuncture."

Jana Panter, ND, of Oceana Bodyworks, specializes in craniosacral therapy (CST). "When working with a child who has a concussion, first I 'listen' to the cerebrospinal fluid to understand the severity of the concussion and how the injury is affecting that child personally, and then I assess how the healing process is going for him or her. By removing restrictions and nurturing the fluid, I help support the body's own inherent ability to heal. CST also lightens the total load of stress on the body, freeing up more of the body's own energy to heal." As a fluid-based therapy, CST is both a diagnostic tool and a therapeutic treatment. Since young athletes may be quick to downplay their symptoms, this process helps the therapist judge the readiness of a child to return to the playing field.

If you want to know more about athletes and head injury, check out the following links:

eMedicine - <http://emedicine.medscape.com>

UpToDate - <http://www.uptodate.com/patients/index.html>

Lystedt Law (text):
<http://apps.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=28A.600.190>

Heads Up: Brain Injury In Your Practice, a CDC program, has free downloads of evaluation forms, care plans and background materials for physicians: http://www.cdc.gov/concussion/HeadsUp/physicians_toolkit.html

Youth Sports Concussions: Education to Legislation, a recent UW Continuing Medical Education weekend course should have the two keynote lectures available for download this spring. Search "concussion" at <http://www.uwtv.org>.

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