



Original research

“It was only a mild concussion”: Exploring the description of sports concussion in online news articles

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ABSTRACT

Background/aims: Concussion is widely discussed in online sports news articles, but the terms used to report this injury vary. This study aimed to use a systematic search strategy and explore the description of sports concussion in online sports news articles.

Methods: A systematic approach was employed to obtain online articles related to sports concussion from four sports associated with concussion (hockey, football, soccer, and rugby). Included articles were evaluated for the descriptors used in relation to concussion and possible consequences associated with concussion. Data was analysed to determine trends between each sport as well between the countries of origin of the articles.

Results: From 200 articles retrieved, 153 were included for analysis. The terms “Head injury” (30.1%) and “Brain injury” (20.9%) were most used to describe a concussive injury, and the most frequently mentioned consequence of concussion was “Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy” (15%). Modifiers which potentially play down the importance of the injury were noted in 9.8% of the articles, with journalists the primary source of these terms.

Conclusions: The variability in reporting of concussion by online news articles may limit the transmission of correct concussion information to the public. To improve the consistency of this reporting, the “Media Concussion Checklist” was developed.

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1. Introduction

Sports concussion has been the subject of much discourse in the scientific literature and mainstream media for many years (Burns, 2014; Providenza et al., 2013). Major national and international sporting events are extensively covered by the media, with vast numbers of column inches and webpages dedicated to summarising these events. The frequency of concussion in some of the world’s biggest sports such as soccer, football, and rugby means that many of these concussive events which occur in high-profile competitions are also the focus of this reporting (Fraas, Coughlan, Hart, & McCarthy, 2014; Nilsson, Hagglund, Ekstrand, & Walden, 2013; Yengo-Kahn, Johnson, Zuckerman, & Solomon, 2016).

A recent paper by Sharp and Jenkins (2015) suggests that the use of the term “concussion” should be avoided as it “lacks any diagnostic precision and at worst encourages a lazy diagnostic approach”. The authors argue that based on signs and symptoms such as headaches, dizziness, sleep disturbance and cognitive impairments, this injury should instead be called a “traumatic brain injury” or specifically a “mild traumatic brain injury”. The use of misleading terms such as “mild concussion”, “minor concussion” and “slight concussion” are commonplace in the media (Goff, 2015). Although media articles are often written by individuals (i.e. journalists) who are not medically trained, these articles have the potential to influence perceptions regarding concussion for a wide audience due to the global reach of the internet.

Allied to these possibly inaccurate descriptions in the media, many major stakeholder groups have been shown to have inconsistent levels of knowledge regarding concussion despite the dissemination of relatively high-profile consensus statements (McCroly et al., 2009, 2013). These stakeholders include coaches,

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players, parents/caregivers and medical professionals (Sullivan et al., 2009, 2012a,b; Sye, Sullivan, & McCrory, 2006; Valovich McLeod, Schwartz, & Bay, 2007). A comprehensive review of misconceptions about traumatic brain injury by Block, West, and Goldin (2016) discusses this in detail, and makes reference to the “information cascade” whereby individuals base their beliefs on those of others (Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer, & Welch, 1998). One example of perpetuating these misconceptions is the interchangeable use of the terms “concussion” and “mild traumatic brain injury” by health professionals. Due to the apparent global misunderstanding of concussions, the media could be an important ally for clinicians in educating the general public and may have an influential role in mediating these misconceptions and increasing knowledge of this condition amongst the general population.

Although limited, there is research which has assessed the effect the media has on public opinion regarding sports medicine related issues such as stem cell research, genetic research, and genetics and medicine (Geller, Bernhardt, & Holtzman, 2002; Ho, Brossard, & Scheufele, 2008; Petersen, 2001). There has also been some examination of the impact of the media with regards to obesity (Gollust, Eboh, & Barry, 2012) and the findings of this work indicates that the media may be able to assist education on other health issues (including concussion). Prior research has shown that the media portrayal of concussion can affect the public perception of this injury, and the potential exists for terms which are perceived as “softer” (e.g. “knock on the head”) to lessen the severity of the perception of this injury (McLellan & McKinlay, 2011). There has been some discussion regarding how the mainstream media can be used to assist concussion awareness; however, the current use of the media for concussion awareness purposes is fragmented and not cohesive in its approach (Ahmed, Lee, Schneiders, McCrory, & Sullivan, 2014).

Despite some country-specific analysis of online concussion news being undertaken, to date there has been no analysis of the descriptors associated with sports concussion in online news stories on a global scale (Crocker, Horne, Phillips, & Sullivan, 2015). Given the significance of concussion at both a sporting and public health level, as well as the influence that the media has in influencing the opinions of the general public, the intersection between concussion and the mainstream media warrants further investigation. This study aimed to take a systematic, non-exhaustive strategy to explore the description of sports concussion in the mainstream media. Further analysis sought to identify geographical patterns associated with different descriptions of sports concussion.

2. Methods

A systematic review of the internet was employed to explore the descriptions of sports concussion in the mainstream media. The search examined the descriptions of sports concussion in four major, internationally-played sports: hockey, football, soccer, and rugby. These sports were selected as they are widely played and viewed, and are also associated with high levels of concussion (Benson, Meeuwisse, Rizos, Kang, & Burke, 2011; Colvin et al., 2009; Mc Fie et al., 2015; McNamee, 2014). In keeping with similar studies evaluating online concussion information, a snapshot approach was adopted to provide a window for analysis of online news stories (Sullivan et al., 2012a,b; Williams et al., 2014). Ethical approval from a recognized ethics committee was not sought for this study as no interaction with participants occurred, and all information collected was freely available on the internet.

2.1. Pilot testing

Initial pilot testing (3 July 2014) was undertaken on two sports not included in the main analysis (Lacrosse and Australian Football). These sports were chosen because of the potential for a high amount of concussion articles, but lower worldwide visibility. Both members of the research team (EH and OHA) sampled the pilot terms (“Lacrosse concussion” and “Australian Football concussion”) by entering these terms into www.google.com and selected the “News” filter. The first 20 results for each search were retrieved and analysed. The link (URL) of each article was retained, and the webpage was saved as a PDF to enable further analysis. In those cases where there was disagreement in the assignment of categories between the two reviewers after scrutinizing the articles, verbal discussions were undertaken in order to reach consensus. This process enabled the evaluation categories to be refined and this generated the final list of categories used in this study (see “Data analysis”).

2.2. Search strategy for study

A systematic strategy was used to determine the appropriate articles at the time of search (1pm GMT on 9 July 2014). For data collection the search engine www.google.com was employed and the “News” filter was selected with the intention to retrieve news articles only (as opposed to blogs or other sources of online information). The following terms were then entered as Google search items:

- “Hockey concussion”
- “Football concussion”
- “Soccer concussion”
- “Rugby concussion”

The first 50 news articles from each search term combination were retrieved for analysis. The link (URL) of each article was retained, and the webpage was saved as a PDF to enable further analysis.

2.3. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria for this study stipulated that articles must be published in English and discuss sports-related concussion. The exclusion criteria were: any article which was not written for a mainstream news outlet (e.g. personal blog posts); any article which was not written in English; articles which did not describe concussion incidents originating from sports (e.g. car crashes, domestic abuse); and any satirical/spoof articles. Duplicate articles were also excluded.

2.4. Data analysis

The authors undertook multiple readings of all the articles retrieved in order to identify the descriptions of sports concussion. As per the pilot testing, evaluation categories (listed in Table 1) were applied to each of the retrieved articles.

Articles with “comments” sections did not have these comments included for analysis. It was anticipated that as these comments were likely to be written by individuals which were not the author of the article, these comments would not be a reflection of the article itself. The originating country of each article was identified, and where a modifier was used in conjunction with a concussion it was noted (e.g. “severe concussion” or “mild concussion”) along with the individual who made reference to the modifier (i.e. journalist, player, coach, etc.). In order to ensure consistency in category

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