

# Ethical Issues Surrounding Concussions and Player Safety in Professional Ice Hockey

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**Abstract** Concussions in professional sports have received increased attention, which is partly attributable to evidence that found concussion incidence rates were much higher than previously thought (Echlin et al. *Journal of Neurosurgical Focus* 29:1–10, 2010). Further to this, professional hockey players articulated how their concussion symptoms affected their professional careers, interpersonal relationships, and qualities of life (Caron et al. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology* 35:168–179, 2013). Researchers are beginning to associate multiple/repeated concussions with Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE), a structural brain injury that is characterized by tau protein deposits in distinct areas of the brain (McKee et al. *Brain* 136:43–64, 2013). Taken together, concussions impact many people in the sporting community from current and former professional athletes and their families to medical and health professionals and researchers. In light of the growing awareness and sensitivity towards concussions, the purpose of this paper is to provide recommendations that are designed to improve player safety in professional hockey and address the ethical issues surrounding these suggestions.

**Keywords** Concussions · Ice hockey · Professional sports · Safety

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## Introduction

In recent years, sports-related concussions have been discussed, debated, and disseminated in many places and platforms ranging from coffee shops to popular media outlets to scientific conferences. In Canada, concussions have received increased attention primarily due to a number of high profile incidents in professional hockey. For example, the careers of National Hockey League (NHL) superstars Eric Lindros and Chris Pronger were severely affected due to post-concussion symptoms. Moreover, Sidney Crosby, arguably the best player in the NHL, has a well-documented history of concussion injuries. Research found that professional hockey players have endured short- and long-term physical and psychological concussion symptoms that persisted from weeks to years [2]. These symptoms affected their careers, qualities of life, and influenced relationships with those closest to them [2]. Given the increasing incidence of concussions in hockey [1], along with the physical and psychological symptoms that accompany them, professional hockey leagues are like any other employer that have an ethical responsibility to foster a safe workplace environment for their employees.

While there is growing concern over concussions in the NHL, other North American professional sports leagues are also under pressure to make their sports safer. The National Football League (NFL) was sued by a group of more than 4,500 former players who claimed that the league concealed evidence on the dangers of repeated head trauma. This lawsuit was