In the span of just two years (during the 2011 and 2012 legislative sessions), every Midwestern state adopted laws to better protect young people from concussion-related injuries. These so-called “return-to-play” laws had three key components:

• educating parents, coaches and players on the signs and symptoms of concussions;
• removing a player from a game or practice who may have a concussion, and not allowing him or her to return that day; and
• requiring sign-off from a medical professional before the player returns to action.

In May 2013, the American Journal of Public Health issued a study examining the “return to play” laws that had been adopted in 44 states. One of the study’s findings was that these laws tended to take a one-size-fits-all approach rather than incorporating “scientific consensus that youth concussions vary on the basis of age, the type of sport, and whether the athlete is male or female.” Also, only about half of the laws require some form of concussion training for coaches, and none define how that education should be structured.

Legislation passed by the Indiana General Assembly this year aims to correct that for football, which some estimate is responsible for about half of the concussions that occur in high school sports. SB 222 requires anyone coaching football for people under the age of 20 to complete a certified education course at least every two years.

The course must cover concussion awareness, equipment fitting, emergency preparedness and proper tackling technique. The bill also requires at least a 24-hour sit-out period for an athlete with a suspected concussion.

Though states’ implementation of “return to play” laws are viewed as a positive step in improving safety, they do little or nothing to prevent concussions from occurring in the first place. Bills such as HB 1205 in Illinois focus more on prevention. That measure would have limited full-contact hitting during youth and high school football practices to one day a week. Though the measure did not pass, it may have helped contribute to the Illinois High School Association’s adoption of new safety rules in May 2013, namely that football teams must practice longer before players wear full pads and take part in full-contact drills.

Other changes have taken place at the association level, including the adoption of USA Football’s Heads Up program (safer tackling, proper equipment, etc.) by a number of youth organizations.

An expert committee formed by the National Academies’ Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council concluded last October that while concussion awareness has risen dramatically, research, policy and practice have a long way to go. There remains a “culture of resistance,” the panel found, when it comes to youth self-reporting and compliance with treatment plans.

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