

New RCPA position statement on CTE calls for government action

- **RCPA acknowledges causal link between exposure to repeated traumatic brain injuries and the development of CTE.**
- **RCPA says there is an urgent need for evidence-based strategies to prevent CTE.**
- **New research reveals Australians are concerned about the implications of head impacts in contact and/or combat sports.**

This International Pathology Day, the Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia (RCPA) announces a new position statement, acknowledging the causal link between exposure to repeated traumatic brain injuries and the development of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE). The RCPA is calling on governing bodies to take action on CTE through five action points, which includes a recommendation that low or no contact versions of sports are played by those under the age of 14.

Dr Lawrie Bott, President of the RCPA said,

“There is an urgent need for evidence-based strategies to prevent CTE, particularly for children and adolescents. The RCPA recognises that developing preventative strategies in any environment of evolving understanding of a disease is challenging, however evidence for the need to act is clear. As a doctor, it worries me that we are continuing to expose boys and girls, and young men and women to lifelong devastating harm, when we already have significant evidence as a community.”

CTE is a neurodegenerative disease that occurs in individuals that have a history of exposure to repetitive traumatic brain injury, usually in the context of repetitive head impacts encountered with participation in contact or combat sports. It can currently only be definitively diagnosed by examination of the brain at autopsy. Brain donation to research has been the primary driver of knowledge of CTE in Australia and elsewhere to date.

Symptoms of CTE can include memory loss, confusion, anxiety or depression, impulsivity, aggression, suicidality, drug and alcohol abuse, and eventually progressive dementia. CTE is found in both young and old, and in the Australian experience, death by suicide is overrepresented in those diagnosed with CTE posthumously.

Neuropathologist Associate Professor Michael Buckland said,

“To date, almost everyone that has been diagnosed with CTE at autopsy in Australia has had a history of repetitive head impacts. Perhaps even more disturbing is the large number of CTE cases, in both amateurs and professionals, who die from suicide.

“Unfortunately, in almost all cases of suicide in Australia, the brain is not examined. This could prevent families from getting the answers they need. It also worries me what we could be missing from a research perspective by not examining these brains. We need to establish better pathways for autopsy brain examination and/or donation for deaths where CTE is suspected.”

Research reveals Australians are concerned

New research commissioned by the RCPA in October 2023 involving 1,001 respondents in Australia, reveals that **98%** of Australians who say they watch contact and/or combat sports such as AFL, NRL and boxing, consider the implications of head impacts on participants of professional contact and/or combat sports to be concerning (38% extremely concerning, 38% very concerning, 18% moderately concerning, 4% slightly concerning, 2% not at all concerning).

Seventy percent of Australian's say they think that head impacts can be linked to depression and **74%** say they think changes need to be made to contact and/or combat sports in Australia to minimise the risk of head impacts.

Ninety two percent of parents or carers of a child who plays contact sports said they are concerned about the implications of potential head impacts sustained whilst playing contact and/or combat sports at school or recreationally, with **84%** saying they would like to see changes made to minimise the risk of head impacts when playing.

CALL TO ACTION

The RCPA has outlined five action points to ensure all those with CTE are diagnosed appropriately, to facilitate research into CTE pathophysiology and treatment, and to promote the development of CTE prevention measures to protect future generations.

1. The RCPA calls for the development of CTE prevention/risk minimisation protocols for all contact and combat sports.

A CTE prevention protocol guide has recently been released by a global coalition of CTE experts¹ and this outlines simple measures that can be taken to reduce CTE risk by reducing cumulative exposure to head injury.

The RCPA calls for specific CTE prevention protocols to be developed for the sports played in Australia and New Zealand. Protocols should consider the maturity of the brain, and the RCPA recommends that low or no contact versions of sports are played by those under the age of 14. This particularly applies to school sports.

2. The RCPA calls for all health and medical services including state and territory forensic services, to identify pathways for autopsy brain examination and/or donation (coronial and/or non-coronial), for deaths where the family raise concerns over CTE.
3. The RCPA will be advocating for the inclusion of traumatic brain injury and contact sports history in standard medical history taking in general practice, neurology, psychiatry, forensic medicine, and other medical specialties.
4. The RCPA requests the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments to explore how medical autopsy, including autopsy brain examination for CTE, can be

¹ Nowinski CJ, Alosco M, Buckland M, Bureau S, Cantu RC, Daneshvar D, McKee A, Mez J, Pearce A, Stern R, Suter C, White A. CTE Prevention Protocol. 2023. <https://concussionfoundation.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/CTE%20prevention%20protocol%20072023.pdf>

better funded. Medical autopsy has been the cornerstone of modern medicine and the issue of CTE highlights the continuing importance of this medical investigation.

5. The RCPA asks the government to follow [recommendations](#) following the recent Senate inquiry.

“The case of CTE highlights the indispensable role of pathology in providing answers for families, in disease surveillance and diagnosis, and in underpinning the formation of preventative healthcare policy. The RCPA recognises that this knowledge about CTE is only possible because of the practice of pathology,” said Dr Bott.

For further information on the RCPA, please visit www.rcpa.edu.au or see updates on Facebook - @PathologyRCPA, X (formerly Twitter) - @RCPAPresident, @PathologyRCPA, or Instagram - @the_rcpa #RCPA #pathology #MedicineIsPathology.

For International Pathology Day: #IPD23

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About the Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia (RCPA):

The RCPA is the leading professional organisation representing pathologists, medical specialists and scientists who provide pathology testing in Australasia. Its mission is to train and support pathologists and to improve the use of pathology testing to achieve better healthcare.

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