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The accessibility, relevance and practicality of the AFL concussion guidelines: What do community players think?

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Background: The need for accurate diagnosis, management and appropriate return-to-play decisions following a concussion in sport has prompted the dissemination of evidenced-based guidelines to assist in managing this condition. The Australian Football League (AFL) has developed sport-specific concussion guidelines and disseminated them to community clubs through their website. As a means of determining potential facilitators of, and barriers to, following these guidelines at the community level, this study assessed how community Australian Football (AF) players, as the target end-users and beneficiaries of the AFL concussion guidelines, perceive the accessibility, relevance and practicality of the AFL concussion guidelines.

Methods: Focus group sessions were held with three groups of six senior community AF players (n = 18). The players were recruited from clubs in the Ballarat Football League and focus group sessions were conducted before the end of the 2012 playing season. Each discussion was approximately 30-min duration. Players were provided with a copy of the AFL concussion guidelines prior to the focus group session and encouraged to examine them. Discussion focused around players' views of the advantages/disadvantages of the guidelines; what groups/individuals would/would not support the guidelines; and what factors/circumstances would make it easier/more difficult for players to follow the guidelines. The focus group sessions were audio recorded and professionally transcribed. Electronic copies of the transcripts were imported into QSR NVivo 7™ software for thematic analysis.

Results: Barriers to following the guidelines were identified around the themes of 'wanting to play' and 'wanting to win'. A lack of resources and problems associated with practicality, particularly in relation to the stepwise return-to-play, were also identified. Consistent application of the guidelines across clubs "same information at the same time" and a conscious effort to inform players of the guidelines and expectations surrounding them were identified as facilitators of guideline use.

Discussion: A "wanting to play at all costs" culture was identified by the players and it was clear that this drives how they would accept advice on returning to play following a concussion. Players expressed a desire to be well informed and to understand the expected pathways if they were concussed. Players expect that clubs would play an important role in disseminating and implementing the guidelines. As such, the club's administration, and not just its coaching and training staff, is seen by them as a key contributor in creating the culture that will ensure the success of the guidelines.