

# Briefing paper

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

Osman Hassan Ahmed and Eric E. Hall, *Physical Therapy in Sport*, Volume 23, January 2017, Pages 7-13.

**Sports concussions occurring in high-profile sports events are often covered by the mainstream media, but the terms used to report this injury in the news articles vary. These descriptions have a different impact on audience perception, and some descriptions can be misleading. Prior research has found that the media could help to educate the general public around misconceptions of concussions. This study is the first to systematically analyse the descriptions of online sports concussion news on a global scale, so as to evaluate the media's role in proliferating misconceptions regarding concussion in sport.**

### Outline of research

A systematic review of online news articles was employed to explore sport concussion descriptions in internationally-played sports associated with concussion: ice hockey, American football, football and rugby news articles. The team used a search engine to retrieve news stories. Pilot testing was carried out in order to generate the final list of description categories. Comments on online articles were excluded from the analysis as they were not written by the article author.

The researchers also analysed the country of origin, the "modifier" used in conjunction with the word concussion (e.g. 'severe' concussion or 'mild' concussion) and the person who made the reference to the modifier, such as a journalist, player or coach.

### Key findings and impact

- 'Concussion' and 'head injury' were the most commonly used descriptors of this injury, while 'chronic traumatic encephalopathy', 'Alzheimer's disease, dementia or other neurocognitive problems' were most frequently mentioned as consequences of concussion.
- The descriptions 'concussion' and 'brain injury' were used most often in football. 'Head knock and clash' only appeared in rugby. For the consequences of concussion, 'chronic traumatic encephalopathy' (CTE) was found to be highest in football, 'Parkinson's disease and other neurological conditions' was highest in hockey, while rugby mentioned 'second impact syndrome' (SIS) most often.
- Articles from different countries were shown to have different preferences in their descriptions of concussion. When referring to the consequences of concussion, articles from each country also varied in how they described the potential consequences of concussion. For example, the UK and Ireland tended to use 'second impact syndrome', while articles from the USA were more likely to refer to 'Alzheimer's, dementia or other neurocognitive problems.'
- 9.8% of articles were found to have inappropriate modifiers, which were most commonly used by journalists. In terms of the geographical breakdown, the USA had the most frequent use of inappropriate modifiers, while the UK had the least.



Read the full paper here:

[www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1466853X16300591](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1466853X16300591)

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## Conclusion

The mainstream media still has scope for improvement in its use of responsible descriptions and modifiers of sporting injuries. The sport concussion descriptions that were “softer” could potentially downplay the severity and were less used. The modifiers of concussion primarily originated from journalists, and the inconsistencies showed that the mainstream media should look to improve in this regard. The terms used to describe the consequences of sports concussion were possibly related to the time when those related illnesses were heavily discussed, while some terms had an element of regional bias. Leading researchers and clinicians in the field of sports concussion need more extensive and consistent engagement with the mass media for better transfer of knowledge. In general, online media sources have the potential for educating the general public and positively influencing concussion knowledge on an extensive scale.

## Next steps

In order to get a more detailed understanding of the concussion knowledge of sports journalists, qualitative studies are planned with sports journalists in different countries. It is hoped that these studies will allow a greater appreciation of journalists’ awareness of concussion, and in turn provide a platform for the possible development of a concussion education tool for sports journalists.



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