Brain damage affects 3 in 10 former National Football League players

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The National Football League (NFL), which for years disputed evidence that its players had a high rate of brain damage, has admitted in federal court documents that it expects nearly a third of retired players to develop long-term cognitive problems and that these conditions are likely to emerge at "notably younger ages" than in the general population.

These findings were revealed in Philadelphia on September 11, 2014 when US District Judge Anita Brody released hundreds of documents from a class action lawsuit brought by 4,500 former players. In this lawsuit the players have claimed that the league engaged in a "concerted effort of deception and denial" in its treatment of concussions, and that it had intentionally hidden from them the danger of concussions and resulting brain damage.

This suit was initially filed in 2011, and was the players' response to a decades-long denial by the NFL of any connection between repeated concussions sustained by players and the high incidence of dementia, Alzheimer's disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), and Parkinson's disease, suffered by a significant number of players.

It became common knowledge that many former players were suffering from early onset of dementia. Many others were committing suicide at alarming rates. Among those were: Terry Long in 2005, Andre Waters in 2006, and Junior Seau, Dave Duerson, and Ray Easterling in 2012. The families of these players insisted that the brains of these players be autopsied for brain damage. All were subsequently diagnosed with chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE).

CTE, which at this point can only be diagnosed postmortem, is a progressive neurological degenerative disease most often found in the brains of boxers and others who have a history of multiple concussions, and provides a direct link between head trauma and dementia later in life.

The official NFL policy had been that concussions have no long-term health effects. To support this position the NFL mirrored the methods of the tobacco industry, which had for decades denied that smoking had any adverse health effects. The multi-billion dollar NFL, like "Big Tobacco," utilized its well-paid "experts" to promote the claim that football-related concussions had only minimal short-term effects and were otherwise harmless. The same well-paid shills would also serve to discredit and intimidate anyone who would state otherwise.

With so many former players suffering from dementia, and the repeated findings of CTE in deceased players, 34 out of 35 in 2012, the NFL owners determined it was to their financial benefit to limit the financial damages. Consequently in 2013 the league reached a tentative $765 million settlement over concussion-related brain injuries among its 18,000 retired players. One of the principal terms of the settlement was that the agreement "cannot be considered an admission by the NFL of liability, or an admission that plaintiffs' injuries were caused by football."

Many players objected to this settlement because they correctly understood that it would not cover the enormous costs that are associated with caring for brain-damaged players. Consequently the court was compelled to later reject this initial settlement proposal.

In July, however, the court announced that it was prepared to accept a new proposal that increased the amount of compensation. Many players, however, were not willing to accept this latest settlement without having an opportunity to examine how these future costs were being calculated. Hence under this pressure

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the court released the documents which showed how the parties had arrived at their settlement figures.

These documents revealed that the NFL and the lead players' lawyers now expect about 6,000 of the 19,400 retired players, or 28 percent, to develop Alzheimer's disease or at least moderate dementia. Many more will be diagnosed with ALS or Parkinson's disease during their lives.

Their calculations showed that players younger than 50 had a 0.8 percent chance of developing Alzheimer's or dementia, eight times greater than the rate of less than 0.1 percent for the general population. For players ages 50 to 54, the rate was 1.4 percent, 14 times greater. The gap between the players and the general population grows wider with increasing age.

These findings confirm what scientists have said for years: that playing football involves incurring repeated brain trauma which greatly increases the risk of developing life-altering and life-threatening neurological diseases.

"This statement clears up all the confusion and doubt manufactured over the years questioning the link between brain trauma and long-term neurological impairment," said Chris Nowinski, the executive director of the Sports Legacy Institute, who has for many years pressured the league to acknowledge the connection between football and brain diseases.

"We have come a long way since the days of outright denial. The number of former players predicted to develop dementia is staggering, and that total does not even include former players who develop mood and behavior disorders and die prior to developing the cognitive symptoms associated with CTE."

The NFL's acknowledgement that 30 percent of its players will suffer from a variety of brain-damage diseases could serve as a criminal indictment of how professional sports, owned and controlled by billionaire owners, willingly and knowingly endangers the health and lives of athletes for its main purpose under capitalism, the amassing of enormous profits.

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