

Rowan's Law: Ontario proposes concussion rules for youth sports

Proposed legislation has support of all 3 parties and is expected to be voted on in mid-December

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Rowan Stringer was 17 when she died after suffering a head injury while playing rugby in 2013. An inquest found the teen had been playing through multiple concussions before her death. (Facebook)

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Ontario is on track to introduce the first concussion legislation in Canada for young athletes in the wake of a teenage rugby player's death.

Rowan's Law, proposed legislation discussed today at a news conference at Queen's Park, honours a young rugby player who died following a game. Currently, Rowan's Law has the support of members of the legislature from each party and is expected to be voted on in early December.

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Rowan Stringer was 17 years old when she died days after being knocked unconscious during a game. An inquest later found she'd suffered three concussions in less than a week before her death and made 49 recommendations, including the creation of legislation to govern all youth sport in the province when it comes to head injuries.

Progressive Conservative MPP Lisa MacLeod spoke at the news conference about Rowan's Law, alongside Liberals and NDP MPPs who are also supporting the new legislation. MacLeod said Rowan's Law also has the support of Michael Coteau, Ontario's sport minister.

"Rowan's Law could save lives," MacLeod said.

Schools and sports organizations will have a year to figure out how to implement the regulations once the legislation is enacted.

Rowan's Law, which is largely based on international concussion guidelines established in Switzerland, will provide education on sport-related concussions to athletes, coaches and parents. It also aims to outline a framework for when to remove an athlete from playing higher-risk sports if a concussion is suspected, ensure athletes don't return to play until they're medically cleared to do so, and ensure appropriate return-to-learn and return-to-play strategies.

Concussion awareness at centre of new rules

Liberal MPP John Fraser said that first and foremost the new legislation is about increasing awareness of concussions and their symptoms.

'Right now, teachers don't have to discuss concussions at all.'- *Kathleen Stringer, Rowan Stringer's mother*

NDP MPP Catherine Fife said that during her work as a school board official she often heard from schools wondering if there was any protocol surrounding concussions for student athletes. The new legislation, she hopes, will lead toward developing effective "return to play" strategies for student athletes who get hurt.

A concussion specialist on hand for the news conference also pointed out that sports aren't the only source of concussions for youth.

Rowan's parents supportive

Stringer's parents, Gord and Kathleen, were on hand for the announcement to stress the importance of having a law in place.

"Right now, teachers don't have to discuss concussions at all," Kathleen Stringer told reporters.

"We're confident that if Rowan had the knowledge she wouldn't have died."

Gord Stringer, acknowledging the government's previous failed attempt to regulate concussion management in 2012, said this is a "second chance" for Ontario and called on politicians to pass the proposed legislation.

"We don't want anyone else to go through what we've gone through," he said.