

NHL commissioner Gary Bettman continues to downplay link between concussions and CTE in latest lawsuit filing

But a Canadian sports medicine specialist says the NHL commissioner has missed the point about the public debate on brain injuries.



NHL commissioner Gary Bettman continues to argue against the link between concussions and CTE. (JOHN LOCHER / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS)

By [KEVIN MCGRAN](#) Sports Reporter

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While Gary Bettman continued to deny a link between concussions and the brain disease chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE, a Canadian sports medicine specialist says the NHL commissioner has missed the point about the public debate on brain injuries.

Bettman sent a 24-page letter to U.S. Senator Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut — that was also filed in U.S. District Court in Minneapolis as part of a concussion lawsuit against the league — saying the science between CTE and repeated head trauma was in its infancy and “the relationship between concussions and the asserted clinical symptoms of CTE remains unknown.”

Bettman stuck to a carefully worded line he’s held for years, arguing the NHL has done all it could to protect players and that the science did not demand a bolder course.

Dr. Paul Echlin, a primary care sports medicine specialist at Elliott Sports Medicine Clinic in Burlington, said Bettman’s letter sent the wrong message and that it was elusive in limiting his response to CTE, while avoiding the discussion of other head injuries that can be traced to repeated head trauma.

“There are so many more things that are related to long-term brain injuries,” Echlin told the Star.

“Post-concussion syndrome is related to traumatic brain injury. Parkinson’s Syndrome. Prolonged and more severe loss of memory and cognition. There are so many disease processes that occur when you traumatize multiple areas of the brain.

“He’s not getting at the issue. You have to stop hitting the brain. Especially when you’re talking about nine year olds or 12-year-olds. It is cumulative.”

Echlin, who is not involved with the NHL or the lawsuit against it, said the league is risking the sport's future by failing to make it safer. "Kids will play some other sport."

While Bettman is accurate in saying the science connecting CTE to repetitive head trauma is in its infancy, Echlin said researchers are close to proving it.

"There is nothing else that all patients (with CTE) have in common except repetitive head trauma," he said. "We know CTE is the result of multiple trauma. That's a given. Can we prove it distinctly and scientifically? No. But the clinical and pathological evidence shows it really clearly.

"Yes, they are going to do more and more studies showing a clear link."

Bettman defended the league's "measured approach" toward the science of concussions. At least six deceased NHLers have been [diagnosed with CTE](#), while dozens of former players are suing the league over the repeated head shots they took playing in the NHL.

Bettman accused the plaintiffs in the concussion case for a public-relations assault on the topic. He ended the letter by retelling the story of the former NHLer Todd Ewen, who died of a reportedly self-inflicted gunshot wound last year at age 49. He was the latest in a string of former enforcers, including Derek Boogaard, Bob Probert and Wade Belak, who died young after displaying symptoms related to CTE, including memory loss and depression.

Unlike some of the others who had their brains posthumously examined, however, Ewen's brain did not show signs of CTE.

"This, sadly, is precisely the type of tragedy that can result when plaintiffs' lawyers and their media consultants jump ahead of the medical community and assert, without reliable scientific support, that there is a causal link between concussions and CTE," Bettman wrote.

“Certainly, a more measured approach consistent with the medical community consensus would be a safer, more prudent course.”

Blumenthal’s interest was sparked this spring when Jeff Miller, the NFL’s senior vice-president for health and safety policy, was asked during a round-table discussion with U.S. Congressional leaders if there was a link between football and “degenerative brain disorders like CTE.”

With files from The New York Times

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