**'OVERPLAYED'**

**Dementia risk fears for football and rugby players are ‘not backed up by science’, claims leading Scots doctor**

By Robert Collins

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Alan Carson has challenged the widespread idea that heading a football or the brutal hits in rugby can increase the likelihood of developing diseases **FEARS that footballers and rugby players are at greater risk of dementia in later life are overplayed, a leading Scottish doctor has claimed.**

Alan Carson, a neuropsychiatrist at Edinburgh University’s Centre for Clinical Brain Sciences, believes the claims are not backed up by science.

He has challenged the widespread notion that heading a football or the brutal hits encountered in rugby can increase the likelihood of developing dementia or Alzheimer’s disease.

It comes just weeks after Lisbon Lions legend Billy McNeill, 77 – whose forte was heading the ball – was revealed to be [suffering from dementia](https://www.thescottishsun.co.uk/news/641595/billy-mcneills-dementia-battle-as-he-walks-into-celtic-park/).

Billy’s wife Liz said she believed her husband would have [carried on his career](https://www.thescottishsun.co.uk/news/641704/billy-mcneill-dementia-risk-heading-a-ball/) on the pitch even if he’d known about the potential dangers.

Carson believes that the idea of link between the sports and the conditions has spread in recent years because: “much of the debate has been played out in mainstream media rather than scientific journals.”

He continued: “It is unlikely that concussion is a risk for neurodegenerative disease. Or, in the worst-case scenario, if it does increase the risk, it does so only marginally.”

Symptoms of concussion include loss of memory or consciousness and disturbance in vision, often referred to as people “seeing stars”.

The issue shot to prominence in the Hollywood film ‘Concussion’ which stars Will Smith.

The film sparked controversy as it portrays the story of a forensic pathologist who in 2002 fought attempts to suppress his research on brain damage suffered by American football players.

In February, a research team at University College London published their findings after studying the brains of six footballers who who had developed dementia.

The post-mortems showed that all six had Alzheimer’s, while four showed signs of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), which is caused by repeated blows to the head.

However, Carson said the thought that heading a ball may cause dementia is unhelpful and stated that one in five over the age of 75 have dementia and most “have never headed a football in their lives.”

Tom McMillan, professor of clinical neuropsychology at the University of Glasgow said: “Whatever course you take in life, there’s going to be risk associated with it.

“What we would like science to do is to be able to tell people what the risk is and we can’t do that yet in this case.

“What’s required is long-term prospective research that take a large cohort, follows them through their careers, and then again afterwards.

“The public are desperately keen to know what the answer is but the evidence is well behind being able to come to a definite view.”