

# Why isn't the brain injury crisis in our homes causing as much concern as concussion in sport?

By Hayley Gleeson



Another week, another professional footballer announcing his retirement after a troubling spate of concussions. This time it's the AFL's Paddy McCartin, who was advised by brain injury specialists to call time on his playing career to minimise the risks of further head trauma.

Football fans have also seen head knocks being taken seriously during the Women's World Cup, where games have been paused several times for concussion checks and four Matildas were sidelined with concussion as part of return-to-play protocols — including Alanna Kennedy, who's been ruled out of the third place game with delayed symptoms.

Clearly, contact sports like football have played an important role in raising awareness of the dangers of concussion, especially the links between repetitive head injury and neurodegenerative diseases like chronic traumatic encephalopathy.

But there's another group who suffer brain injuries at staggering rates but whose suffering too often goes unreported, untreated, unseen: domestic violence victims.

Many women experiencing domestic abuse — and they're mostly women — don't have the luxury of choosing if or when they'll return home after they've sustained a concussion, let alone the resources or freedom to seek medical care.

They have been punched in the head, thrown down stairs or slammed into walls, whacked with weapons and strangled until they lose consciousness by men who ostensibly love them. Why isn't their plight printed on the front pages of newspapers, the focus of months-long Senate inquiries?

Why isn't the brain injury crisis in our homes sparking as much outrage and concern as concussions among our athletes?

Because the evidence is pointing to a massive, pernicious problem. Brain injury in women — and especially domestic violence victims — is disturbingly understudied, with the majority of concussion research focused on young male athletes.

Still, studies have found as many as three-quarters of female victims of domestic violence in the United States have suffered traumatic brain injury — 11-12 times the number experienced by athletes and military personnel combined.



And in Australia, a 2018 study found 40 per cent of family violence victims attending Victorian hospitals over a decade had sustained a brain injury — likely just the tip of the iceberg given how few victims seek medical care. For First Nations women, the statistics are even more startling: Aboriginal women experience head injury due to assault at 69 times the rate of non-Indigenous women and face unique barriers to accessing health services.

Crucially, women are also more susceptible to brain injury and take longer to recover than men, while the risk of prolonged recovery and long-term health issues increases with each concussion.

Domestic violence victims are particularly vulnerable, experts say, not just because of the sheer number of injuries they sustain — or the fact many also suffer hypoxic brain injury from strangulation — but because concussions affect patients' ability to think clearly, limiting their ability to defend themselves or escape dangerous situations.

### **Good luck finding good care**

Despite all this, many frontline workers aren't looking for brain injuries, meaning domestic violence victims with concussion symptoms like fatigue, headaches, cognitive dysfunction, insomnia and anxiety are too often dismissed as "difficult" or mentally ill.

It's clear police also need brain injury training and education, particularly given their history of misidentifying victims as perpetrators. It might seem obvious, but if you don't know that the symptoms of concussion look a lot like alcohol intoxication, you're more likely to decide the confused, slurring woman in front of you is an offender, not someone in need of medical attention.

But even if support workers in Australia were screening clients, there are few public brain injury services where concussion patients can be referred for diagnosis and treatment. Instead, women are struggling for months or years with debilitating symptoms that affect their ability to work, care for their family and leave violent relationships. Some also end up in prison, where as many as 80 per cent of women have suffered brain injuries, frequently the result of domestic violence.

Confoundingly, governments have long been aware of how urgent this problem is, but have done seemingly little to address it. The Victorian Government, for instance, has ignored most of the recommendations of a major report it commissioned on brain injury and family violence. Then again, there are no concussion rehabilitation services in that state's public health system, so it's not just victims of abuse who are struggling to find good care.

It's a similar story in NSW, where public brain injury rehabilitation units prioritise patients with moderate and severe brain injuries, leaving people with concussion — the most common brain injury by far — to track down their own expensive, private specialists and cobble together their own recovery program. If you live in a regional or remote area, good luck to you.

### **Out of sight, out of mind?**

So why, when domestic violence victims with brain injuries far outnumber athletes with concussion, has such a vulnerable group been so overlooked? A cynical take would be: if governments fund more research and gather more evidence showing what is at stake — how costly brain injury is to health systems and the broader economy in the long term — they won't be able to keep ignoring the problem, they'll have to invest more in education and treatment.

Perhaps it's also a matter of visibility, of sport's cultural significance. When a footballer gets tackled hard and sustains a concussion, it's a public spectacle, a point of discussion in TV news broadcasts and sports pages for weeks. In contrast, so much domestic violence happens behind closed doors, in private — and many victims wrestle with a deep sense of shame about speaking out, sometimes because they're treated as if their abuse is their fault.

It's one reason why Dr Eve Valera, a global leader in domestic violence brain injury research, has described athletes as "the luckiest people in the world" to get brain injuries. "The second you get a brain injury, boom, you're yanked off the field," she says. You'll usually also have a team overseeing your recovery, managing your return to play. If only domestic violence victims received the same care and attention.

It's probably about money, too — at least at the elite level. There is mounting pressure on professional sporting organisations — some of which are being sued by former team members suffering from the devastating effects of repetitive head trauma — to understand and protect players from the harms of concussion, which is why some codes have funded research and education campaigns.

But what if the invisibility of domestic violence victims with brain injuries is, at its heart, a reflection of who is valued most in society, who matters? To many sports fans, footballers are like gods; they're worshipped for being talented, revered for making their clubs crazy amounts of money. But marginalised women being beaten up and choked by their husbands? Out of sight, out of mind. It's past time we started paying attention.