

**Chiropractors, Concussions, and Return to Play: Myth and Fact**

*In 2020, House Bill 558 was introduced, which would dangerously expand the scope of practice to chiropractors to clear youth athletes to return to practice or play following a concussion. This would be in opposition to House Bill 557 that passed into law in 2016, in part due to the story of Kort Breckenridge, a young man from Driggs who suffered devastating brain injury from additional head trauma in the midst of a concussion.*

**MYTH**: Concussion Management is within the chiropractic scope of practice

**FACT**: Concussions are not simple injuries; they are complex traumatic brain injuries that vary from athlete to athlete. Idaho’s current concussion law is meant to encourage safety and ensure these types of injuries are evaluated by healthcare experts trained in concussions and other neurologic injuries. Chiropractors are not primary care providers; they do not perform basic primary care services such as vaccinations and physicals. **If a player were to receive a cut or laceration during a game or practice, a chiropractor is not able to suture the cut and treat this simple injury**—it puts youth athletes at serious risk to allow chiropractors to treat concussions and other traumatic brain injuries without consulting a physician.

The American Chiropractic Association offers the following definition of chiropractic: Chiropractic is a health care profession that focuses on disorders of the musculoskeletal system and the nervous system, and the effects of these disorders on general health. Chiropractic care is used most often to treat neuromusculoskeletal complaints, including but not limited to back pain, neck pain, pain in the joints of the arms or legs, and headaches.

National standards adopted by the American Academy of Neurology and endorsed by the NFL and other leading organizations recommend that the return to play process be managed by health care providers who are both knowledgeable about sports concussion and practicing within the scope of their training and experience.[[1]](#footnote-1) Chiropractors simply do not meet these standards.

Chiropractors have never been authorized in Idaho code to evaluate and clear athletes who have a concussion. Chiropractors can be a vital part of a comprehensive healthcare system, but they must consult with a physician before clearing a youth athlete; this is the medical standard of care.

**MYTH**: After completing a nationally-recognized or board of chiropractor-approved education program, chiropractors would then have the necessary education to evaluate and clear concussions for a student athlete’s return to play

**FACT**: The written examination offered by the National Board of Chiropractic Examiners offers a comprehensive review of chiropractic medicine, **but with no testing on concussions, brain injuries, or neurology**.

Here is 2020 testimony given by Dr. Kurt Nilsson, an Idaho sports medicine physician who has served as the Medical Director of the St Luke’s Concussion Clinic since its inception in 2011. He has also worked with the US Ski Team, US Soccer Federation, and serves as a concussion consultant for USA Cycling:

“The chiropractic lobby would have you believe that a “nationally-recognized” concussion education program will provide all of the information needed to manage concussions, and this is simply not true, mostly because there is no comprehensive, nationally recognized concussion education program apart from the curricula of the above mentioned allied health professions. The CDC’s most extensive training course on concussion for healthcare providers is an online module worth all of only **2 hours** of continuing medical education. When I graduated from medical school, you would not have wanted me take out your appendix just because I spent 2 extra hours reading a surgery textbook. I can also tell you that, of all the major medical organizations in the US and around the world participating in research and producing guidelines on the diagnosis and management of concussions, including the AAN, AAP, AMSSM, NATA, CDC, and the international consortium or researchers known as the CISG, **not one of the scores of authors is a chiropractor**. **The American Board of Chiropractic Sports Medicine’s position statement on concussion is a one-page summary of other guidelines.** This opacity brings into question whether the Board of Chiropractic Physicians is capable of judging the quality of any nationally recognized training program.

This problem as it relates to chiropractors managing concussions may be best illustrated by a research article published in the journal **Chiropractic and Manual Therapies in June, 2018**, and authored by 2 faculty members at the Texas Chiropractic College. The study was undertaken “…to assess the self-reported mild traumatic brain injury (MTBI) knowledge, recognition and treatment by chiropractic practitioners”. Reading directly from the authors conclusion: “T**here is an overconfidence of the chiropractic practitioner in recognition of MTBI which is incongruent with the low knowledge scores. Further education of the chiropractic clinician is warranted**.”

**MYTH**: Not all patients and school districts have access to physicians, so House Bill 557 limits patient access to concussion treatment

**FACT**: The Idaho concussion law has been in place for more than three years, and no access problems have been reported. With so much emphasis on coordinated care models such as the patient centered medical home, it is a major step in the wrong direction to expand the chiropractic scope of practice instead of encouraging coordinated and patient-centered treatment for youth with concussions. With advances in telehealth and increased support for rural communities, there is no credible reason to think a chiropractor treating a youth athlete cannot consult or work with a physician.

Dr. Chad Jonson is a fellowship-trained primary care sports physician in the Magic Valley who has dedicated considerable time to proper care and treatment of injured athletes. Here is part of his testimony to the legislature from 2020:

“I think it is very important to emphasize that we are talking about brain injuries in children. Even in the more rural schools here in the Magic Valley, they have access to many physicians that can appropriately manage concussions in a timely manner. Currently, there are children who have sustained concussions in the Magic Valley who are not being managed by an appropriate medical provider. I end up seeing some of them in my office after they have been inappropriately managed. Sometimes it can take much longer to help them in their recovery due to inappropriate treatment in the initial period of injury. Others require many more resources to undo the mismanagement of their concussion in order to restore them to their previous level of function. **If we intentionally consider this legislature for chiropractors to manage concussions, we are regressing back to a day and age that took tragedies to initiate the legislature on concussions in the first place.**”

*Allowing chiropractors to clear youth athletes after a concussion puts those youth at risk. It is an unwise and dangerous expansion of the chiropractic scope of practice. Appropriate concussion management requires coordinated care and the expertise of physicians and non-physicians alike. House Bill 557 was a major step forward in protecting children and ensuring that concussions are properly diagnosed and treated—we should resist expanding the chiropractic scope of practice and continue to encourage patient-centered care.*

1. Evaluation and management of concussion in sports: report of the Guideline Development Subcommittee of the American Academy of Neurology, May 2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)