

# Delayed action on rugby concussion

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My first exposure to the possibility of concussion caused by rugby came on the Fitzroy School playground one lunchtime 60 years ago.

I weighed all of five stone, a waif of a kid compared with the next-best-thing to a giant that bore down on me, the last line of defence between him and the try line.

His name was Mike Bridger and he later played for Taranaki, but at age 10 he seemed big enough that day to have already won selection. There was no malicious intent, though, when his knee connected my nose in the tackle.

I can't recall if I was knocked unconscious...well, you wouldn't, would you.

My nose was broken, but nobody in Standard 3 had ever heard of concussion. No matter. That singular event was enough to change my sporting aspirations to hockey, which meant total ostracism when I got to rugby-mad New Plymouth Boys High.

Again, no matter. I'm pretty sure I had a lucky escape because of what happened that day, a fateful redirection away from a national pastime that's now seen as a potential trigger for dementia.

Nobody knew that in 1963, when a winger called Kerry Hurley dived over in the corner at Rugby Park on full time to save Taranaki's hold on the Ranfurly Shield, which unthinkably was about to go to Wanganui for the first time.

Now Hurley and four other players in that champion shield-holding team have dementia, and there's a possibility it was caused by the knocks they took in those tough days of life-and-death footie when injury replacements weren't allowed and you toughed it out for the team.

Note the word "possibility". According to the Alzheimers Society, our chances of getting dementia by 65 are one in 14. But it goes up as we age, and by 80 – the likely average age of most survivors of the 1964 shield team – the odds are now one in six.

There are 26 players in the photo of that team on a wall of the Taranaki Rugby Union HQ, so on a statistical basis between four and five of them will have dementia by now anyway. It was suggested a sixth player also has it, which if correct does start to push the statistical boundary into something more than chance.

However, no medical expert is going to come right out and say there is a definite connection between brain trauma suffered in contact sport (or any other cause) and the onset of conditions like Alzheimers and the various forms of dementia.

None did in recent media stories about the Ranfurly Shield Five. Doctors and medical researchers simply don't know for sure, according to most if not all of the research commentary you'll find on the internet.

Proving anything in research is constrained by things called "variables". These are all the other factors and influences that may have had an impact on someone from the time they got a knock in rugby to the time they and those close to them noticed dementia-like decline.

The only thing the experts seem reasonably certain about is some dementia cases may be hereditary. But even that's a lottery: in my family, there was an uncle on each side of the tree who got Alzheimers (one played rugby). But there were heaps of uncles (and aunts) who didn't.

The dilemma we face with the Ranfurly Shield Five tragedy is similar to the one the baby-boomer generation endured over cigarette smoking. As the dangers of that began to emerge in the middle of last century, tobacco companies could enlist research uncertainty for at least 40 years before anything meaningful was done.

Leading research from the US - partly driven by brain injury trends in the military, and before that in boxing - has got as close as any to showing there is more than just an accidental connection between head-knocks and delayed health consequences.

After ignoring the problem for so long, the rugby union has finally established concussion protocols. There is no longer shaming peer pressure to do crazy courage acts of the kind described by past players.

While English referee Wayne Barnes invites derision over his forward pass decisions, his judgement on head injuries is precise. During the first Wales/All Blacks test last weekend, he stopped play immediately when he saw a Welsh player fall back and thump his head on the ground.

When that kind of concern is shown at the highest level, you can be sure the message has got through at last.