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# FOREWORD

*Alan Schwarz*

**T**he *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics* has asked me to write this foreword on concussions in sports because, I am told, I'm the reporter who thrust concussions onto the national stage. So forgive me when I say that, in my mind, my 120 articles in *The New York Times* were never about law, medicine nor ethics. They were about making sense.

It started with the National Football League. Amid reports that a remarkable number of retired players were developing Alzheimer's-type dementia in their 50s and 60s, a league executive countered, "There are a great many people who have played football...who do not appear to have suffered these types of deficits." Indeed. I asked if that meant cigarettes were no big deal because most smokers don't get cancer. Later, the league claimed — in a pamphlet the league said was specifically designed to educate players about head injuries — that research "has not shown that having more than one or two concussions leads to permanent problems if each injury is managed properly." True, I suppose. Also harmless are, when managed properly, chainsaws. C'mon, fellas.

On to college. When several NCAA football stars received questionable concussion treatment from their schools, the NCAA's top medical official told me that brain injuries "have and continue to be at the forefront of prevention efforts in sports injury for the NCAA and its membership." Sounds good, right? So I asked whether the NCAA was providing specific education about concussions. He responded that "the

membership has not suggested" such education, so it was not the NCAA's place to step in and require it — even though the NCAA already mandates education regarding drugs, eligibility, and gambling. (The point appeared lost on the poor fellow.) When we moved on to the alarming rates of dementia in retired football players, he said: "We are interested in following and tracking these specific cases of N.F.L. football players. We're following it." I mentioned that every one of those players had also been an NCAA player, some playing more in college than in the N.F.L. Silence.

Let's go down in high school and youth football, where a frequent topic was budgets. The vast majority of organized football games among children are played with no doctor or athletic trainer present, the explanation always being, "We don't have the money to pay for one." But this is stunningly untrue — they do have the money, they just choose to spend it on a defensive line coach. How about the kids' helmets, whose shells and foam are often battered well past their ability to provide proper head protection? The nation's only rule regarding helmets is that they must have met safety standards at the time of manufacture; they need not do so, one or two or eight years later, when the kids actually wear them. Why is that? "Because we don't have the money" to regularly recondition them, I was told. OK. Then where'd that new press box come from?

I have been mistaken for an advocate an awful lot since my series on concussions began in 2007. If I was an advocate for anything, it wasn't football reform. It wasn't even child safety, believe it or not. It was for asking, pleading, and then downright insisting that the caretakers of football — from the N.F.L. down to pee-wee leagues — start recognizing the choices being made, and owning up to them.

The issue of concussions in sports is a very difficult one. Of course it involves law, medicine, and ethics. And my goodness, so many dollars. But what exposed the problem was demanding that people make sense, and that's what will fix it, too.

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*Alan Schwarz is a National Correspondent for the New York Times. He won the 2010 Society of Professional Journalists Award and the 2010 New York Press Club Award for Sports Reporting for articles exposing the long-term dangers of concussions and the National Football League's flawed response to brain injuries. Mr. Schwarz's earlier articles on athlete concussions won awards from the Associated Press Sports Editors, the New York Press Club, the Society of the Silurians and the New York State Associated Press Association. He was also a finalist for the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for public service.*