

TO: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

FROM: Graham L. Pollett, MD, FRCPC
Medical Officer of Health

DATE: 2011 March 17

VIOLENCE IN HOCKEY


Recommendations

It is recommended:

- 1) *That the Board of Health endorse the open letter to National Hockey League (NHL) Commissioner, Gary Bettman, and the Board of Directors attached as Appendix A to Report No. 027-11 re Violence in Hockey; and further*
- 2) *That Report No. 027-11 re Violence in Hockey be forwarded to Ontario Boards of Health, the Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alPHA) Board of Directors, the Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) Board of Directors, and the City of London Council requesting endorsement of the open letter to the NHL Commissioner and Board of Directors.*

In response to recent incidents of fighting and violence in the NHL, the Medical Officer of Health together with Dr. Peter Jaffe, Professor, Faculty of Education, University of Western Ontario and Executive Director of the Centre For Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children and Mr. Ray Hughes, National Coordinator, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Centre for Prevention and Science, sent an open letter to Mr. Gary Bettman, NHL Commissioner, and the NHL Board of Governors (Appendix A). This initiative is consistent with past actions undertaken by the Medical Officer of Health and the Board of Health concerning violence in hockey as part of a comprehensive strategy to address violence in society, particularly the prevention of violence against women and children.

The letter generated considerable media attention, several examples of which are attached as Appendices B, C and D.



Graham L. Pollett, MD, FRCPC
Medical Officer of Health

February 25, 2011

An Open Letter to Gary Bettman & the NHL Board of Governors

We are enthusiastic, life-long hockey fans who want to lend support to Mario Lemieux and many commentators' views that the recent incidents of fighting in hockey cannot be tolerated. In particular, we endorse Mario Lemieux's words after a recent Penguin-Islander brawl, "it was painful to watch the game I love turn into a sideshow The NHL (needs) to send a clear and strong message that those kinds of actions are unacceptable and embarrassing to the sport." We agree with these sentiments.

As fans, we note the level of self-control that players at the junior and NHL level can demonstrate during international competitions such as the World Junior Championship and the Olympics. Even the NHL players reduce fighting by almost 50% during the Stanley Cup Playoff without affecting attendance or TV viewers. Scandinavian countries have banned hockey fights and other leagues such as college hockey have managed to eliminate this part of the game.

We know that the NHL wants to put the best possible product on the ice and you are always looking for ways to improve the game. We would ask you to consider a number of points in your upcoming discussions:

1. There is increasing research and public awareness about the short and long-term harm from concussions. We have gone from celebrating Sydney Crosby's gold medal goal last year to worrying about his future as a result of several blindside hits to his head. Other stars like Marc Savard are facing uncertain futures from repeated hits to the head. What is frequently missed is that there is no difference in a hit to the head by an elbow or shoulder than a punch to the head in a fight. Recent fights have sidelined a number of NHL players with concussions and other injuries. Fights are not always consensual acts between players of the same size and experience. Hockey is an intense and physical game that requires protection of players and prevention of injuries wherever possible.
2. What message do we send junior hockey leagues and younger players when we don't send stronger messages against hockey violence? NHL players are role models and set the standards for youth playing hockey. Junior hockey players who aspire to be drafted by the NHL have to fight and risk injury in order to prove their worth and full potential. These young men are teenagers and face unnecessary risks of concussion to pursue their dreams. Junior hockey team owners have stated that their teens have to fight since they are suppliers to the NHL. Hockey should be about athletic speed, skill and determination

rather than becoming a goon for a team. In a recent Bruins-Stars game, there were 3 fights in the first 6 seconds of play. It is hard to argue that fighting is essential to the game and is part of the flow of the sport under those conditions.

3. Many parents and educators are worried about the impact of media violence on our children's development. The fights and hits to the head have become a form of entertainment where videos have been created to glorify these incidents and sports shows that highlight the fights of the week are part of a hockey entertainment package. The media promotes the most negative aspects of the game and signals to our youth that this unsportsmanlike conduct is to be admired.

We understand that there is tremendous resistance to change. We recognize that some fans and commentators support the violence and see it as inevitable in a high-speed contact sport like hockey. The Olympics prove the opposite. Fighting and violence sells but we would argue that the fans would not turn away. In fact in some of the US markets, you might find more families interested in the game without the fighting.

We know that fighting has always been part of hockey but rules change in hockey on a regular basis from penalty calls to the size of the goal crease. Goalies wore no masks in the NHL just 30 years ago and junior players didn't have to wear mouth guards or helmets with visors. Eliminating all intentional hits to the head including fighting should be part of that same shift and would send a strong message that violence is no longer acceptable to our hockey heroes and our national pastime.



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London activist takes a swing at hockey fights

A silent majority deplore fighting but don't dare say so, claims Peter Jaffe

By PATRICK MALONEY, THE LONDON FREE PRESS

Last Updated: February 25, 2011 9:53pm

A silent chorus of hockey players, including some NHLers, is afraid to publicly speak out against fighting in the sport, an anti-violence advocate says.

In the wake of Mario Lemieux's anger over a brawl involving his Pittsburgh Penguins, Peter Jaffe of the University of Western Ontario has co-signed a public letter urging NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman to ban fights.

Jaffe says he speaks for a group of hockey players too intimidated by the sport's culture to speak up.

"I have contact with junior hockey and NHL players and all of them are afraid to come out publicly," Jaffe said. "They say (speaking out) will hurt their careers; they'll be seen as chickens. There's a code of silence. If you challenge the issue you're going to be singled out."

Jaffe wrote his letter to Bettman with Graham Pollett, London's chief public health official, and Ray Hughes of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

A huge hockey fan, Jaffe says he has interviewed countless major-junior players and three NHLers who've expressed those anti-fighting feelings off the record.

NHL fighting is receiving renewed scrutiny after a Feb 11 brawl between the New York Islanders and Pittsburgh.

That brawl prompted the Penguins' famed owner, Lemieux, to rip the league's response.

"If the events relating to (the fight) reflect the state of the league, I need to re-think whether I want to be a part of it," Lemieux said. "What happened . . . wasn't hockey. It was a travesty."

Jaffe and Pollett cite Lemieux's comments in the letter to Bettman and the NHL governors. They also note fighting disappears in the playoffs and is a non-entity in U.S. college hockey.

E-mails to NHL spokesperson and Bill Daly, the NHL's deputy commissioner, were not returned.

The concerns of Jaffe and Pollett appear to be two-pronged: The physical damage, specifically concussions, fighting poses to players and the message about violence it sends to fans, particularly children.

But any attempt to alter hockey's culture, given the passionate support many fans have for fighting, will face severe resistance.

A New York-based website, hockeyfights.com, underscores on-ice pugilism's popularity. The site, featuring video clips and analysis of NHL fights, draws a whopping 10 million page views a month.

Its founder is David Singer, an articulate web developer and father of two who questions whether hockey fighting hurts society.

"I can't think of anyone who loves a good hockey fight more than I do and I certainly know better than to walk down the street and punch someone in the face," he said.

"A group targeting all forms of violence . . . is looking for some sort of nanny state and not looking for anybody to have self-responsibility or parental responsibility.

"The players will tell you, 'I want to hurt the other guy but not injure him.' It sounds contradictory but it's how they go about their business."

Singer says he gets only a few e-mails every month complaining about hockey: "It seems to be wildly popular."

Fighting clearly causes injuries. This season alone, Toronto tough guy Colton Orr and Calgary goon Raitis Ivanans were concussed in fights and Islanders goalie Rick DiPietro suffered a facial fracture.

Perhaps more important to Jaffe, is the impression it leaves on young fans.

"The fights go against everything else we tell children about their behaviour," he said. "If no one was watching (hockey), I wouldn't care. I'm concerned about the impact it has on boys and young men."

Jaffe is less concerned with the torrent of nasty e-mails he expects to receive from pro-fighting fans.

Having spoken out publicly before, he's prepared for another wave of nasty feedback.

"The bullies don't own hockey. Hockey is my sport, too. It's my favourite sport," he said. "I also believe I'm part of the silent majority who are afraid to speak out because they'll be drowned out by the Neanderthals who control the sport."

Jaffe said he hopes his letter generates debate when Bettman meets with the NHL's governors in March.

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An Open Letter to Gary Bettman and the NHL Board of Governors

We are enthusiastic, lifelong hockey fans who want to lend support to Mario Lemieux and many commentators' views that the recent incidents of fighting in hockey cannot be tolerated. In particular, we endorse Mario Lemieux's words after a recent Penguin-Islander brawl: "It was painful to watch the game I love turn into a sideshow . . . The NHL (needs) to send a clear and strong message that those kinds of actions are unacceptable and embarrassing to the sport." We agree with these sentiments.

We know that the NHL wants to put the best possible product on the ice and you are always looking for ways to improve the game. We would ask you to consider a number of points in your upcoming discussions:

1. There is increasing research and public awareness about the short- and long-term harm from concussions. We have gone from celebrating Sidney Crosby's gold-medal goal last year to worrying about his future as a result of several blindside hits to his head. Other stars, like Marc Savard, are facing uncertain futures from repeated hits to the head. What is frequently missed is that there is no difference in a hit to the head by an elbow or shoulder than a punch to the head in a fight.

2. What message do we send junior-hockey leagues and younger players when we don't send stronger messages against hockey violence?

NHL players are role models and set the standards for youth playing hockey. Junior hockey players who aspire to be drafted by the NHL have to fight and risk injury in order to prove their worth and full potential. These young men are teenagers and face unnecessary risks of concussion to pursue their dreams.

Junior-hockey team owners have stated that their teens have to fight since they are suppliers to the NHL. Hockey should be about athletic speed, skill and determination rather than becoming a goon for a team. In a recent Bruins-Stars game, there were three fights in the first six seconds of play.

3. Many parents and educators are worried about the impact of media violence on our children's development. The fights and hits to the head have become a form of entertainment such as videos which glorify these incidents and sports shows that highlight the fights of the week as part of a hockey entertainment package. The media promotes the most negative aspects of the game and signals to our youth that this unsportsmanlike conduct is to be admired.

Peter Jaffe PhD, professor, faculty of education, University of Western Ontario

Graham Pollett MD, medical officer of health, the Middlesex-London Health Unit

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Concussion concern a no-brainer

Late last month, three prominent Londoners penned an open letter to Gary Bettman, commissioner of the National Hockey League, and his board of governors, eloquently pleading for action on the problem of violence in the NHL.

It was signed by Peter Jaffe, an education professor at the University of Western Ontario, Graham Pollett, medical officer of health at the Middlesex-London Health Unit, and Ray Hughes, national co-ordinator of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health's centre for prevention science.



Larry Cornies

The letter made clear to Bettman that the trio was writing as "enthusiastic, lifelong hockey fans." They understood, they wrote, that intense physicality is part of the game and that Bettman faces "tremendous resistance to change."

But they concluded that "eliminating all intentional hits to the head, including fighting" must be part of hockey's next iteration. It's time, they wrote, for the NHL to "send a strong message that violence is no longer acceptable to our hockey heroes and our national pastime."

It would be nice to think that the letter got Bettman's notice — that it wasn't simply noted and filed by some administrative assistant three org-chart levels down from the executive office. Open letters to the NHL commissioner are about as common as pucks in a net during practice.

In the short time since that letter was posted, several additional bits of evidence have emerged to buttress the case.

Marty McSorley, the former NHL tough guy who ranks fourth among all-time penalty minutes leaders, said he worries about telltale signs that his career as an enforcer is coming back to haunt him.

“The Dallas Morning News reported this week that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention now estimates the number of sports- and recreation-related concussions in the U.S. each year to be more than 3.8 million.**”**

"When I try to shave my right sideburn, I have trouble focusing on it," McSorley told *Globe and Mail* hockey writer Eric Duhatschek. "Then there are times when I'll walk into a room and I'll stand there and go 'Why am I here again?' and you just don't know."

Dr. Charles Tator, a Toronto neurologist widely regarded as the country's most prominent expert on concussions, ramped up a public awareness campaign to get both kids and coaches to understand the brain's delicacy and how susceptible it is, especially before the age of 20, to injury.

He visits schools and coaching clinics carrying a "brain" made of Jell-O, asking onlookers to jiggle it and emphasizing that a human brain has the same consistency and fragility, protected only by a thin skull.

The *Dallas Morning News* reported this week that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta now estimates the number of sports- and recreation-related concussions in the United States each year to be more than 3.8 million. Football and hockey were among the most problematic sports, but others that ranked surprisingly high were cheerleading and girls' soccer.

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comment

■ CORNIES

NHL can't bury its head in the sand

FROM PAGE E1

And on Thursday, Boston University scientists revealed the results of their study of the brain of Bob Probert, the former NHL enforcer in fifth spot — right behind McSortley — on the all-time penalty minutes list.

Probert died of a heart attack last summer at the age of 45. His brain, investigators said, showed he had chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a degenerative disease that may have had its roots in Probert's three

documented concussions and the hundreds of other blows to his head over his hockey career. Boston University is trying to address what it calls a "concussion crisis" in sports.

Little more than a year ago, Sidney Crosby was the hero of every hockey fan in Canada as he scored the goal that won gold at the Winter Olympics. Today, he's out of action (since Jan. 5) because of a concussion — the most valuable player in the world, sitting on hockey's sidelines.

There's no doubt the Crosby effect has brought increased attention to, and awareness of, violence in hockey. It's a much-needed antidote to the "rock-'em, sock-'em" culture that has come to dominate the sport's pro ranks since the 1980s.

The notion that brawls, head shots and other forms of hockey violence are an integral and indispensable part of the game is a canard. Look no further than the Olympics or the annual world junior tournament for proof.

Bettman and his board need to pay attention and act. Doing otherwise would be to inadvertently mimic a certain minister of information who, during Saddam Hussein's demise, insisted there were no Americans in Baghdad. Or a certain North African dictator who insists no protests are occurring in his country, when all the world knows otherwise.

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Fighting doesn't belong in hockey

About a year or two ago, I wrote a column about my opposition to fighting in hockey. Now I understand it's a passionate sport, both for those playing and those watching and cheering on their favourite team. However, I know I'm not the only one that feels this way. So I was cheering myself when I read the excerpts from Dr. Peter Jaffe, Graham Pollett, (London's Chief Public Health Official) and Ray Hughes (Centre of Addiction and Mental Health) letter to Gary Bettman and the NHL Board of Governors. The letter focuses on reasons to consider removing fights from the game.

The feedback that I received from my column was a mixed bag. Some were from people who felt the same as I, that the sport can be appreciated without watching some guy get beaten to a pulp. These were from mostly mothers and a few fathers who had children playing the sport and were concerned about taking their kids up to the competitive level, even though they were really talented and loved the sport. Others thought that the game would lose that raw edge to it, where men settle their disputes with their fists instead of goals. And then there were many that were downright ugly about the fact that they believed fighting was a part of hockey and made no bones about it. Some of my favourite quotes include:

"Get back in the kitchen."

"You're an empty skirt."

"This is why women shouldn't be involved in hockey."



Rants & Reasonings

SHERYL ROOTH

Sheryl Rooth is a London mother and creative writer. You can reach her at srooth@sympatico.ca

And my favourite, "Ur stupid" came from an executive at a large corporation in London, who sent his message on his company Blackberry. Surprised that he had opposable thumbs to even tap out his message, I just took it from where it came. He was a hockey fan that lives for the blood rush of seeing two other people fight. I guess it's pretty exciting when it's not you with the concussion. After watching hockey with my husband, the world's biggest hockey fan, for over 20 years, I still don't get the thrill of a fight. Perhaps I just have too much estrogen or compassion.

I found it interesting that the authors of this letter used Mario Lemieux as a pivotal point in their argument. Citing comments he made from his

disgust over a recent brawl between his team, the Pittsburgh Penguins and the New York Islanders. All I could think of was an introduction between the Pot and the Kettle. Mario has had his share of ugly encounters on the ice. Gary Lupul, Gary Carpenter, Bobby Gould, Todd Krygier, Brad Ference, the list goes on. To renounce fighting now seems a little silly on his part, but perhaps years off the bench has changed his perspective. But he didn't say that. His quote "It was painful to watch the game I love turn into a sideshow The NHL (needs) to send a clear and strong message that those kinds of actions are unacceptable and embarrassing to the sport." There was nothing that I saw in that fight that was any different than the fight between the Pens and the Caps in 1987, to which Mario was involved.

I believe there are many hockey players who hate the fighting. Who spend hundreds of hours perfecting their game, in hopes that they don't ever have to use their fists to prove themselves. But you'll never hear them say it out loud. When you look at the kids on the Knights or the Bulls or the Spits, they're barely shaving. We love the game, the entertainment they provide, the money they generate. I spend every day teaching my kids that fighting isn't the answer, and they click to the big game where fighting is the answer. Oh sure, there's a five-minute consequence for their actions, but that's it. You don't get a lot of close-ups on the scars.

