

Locker-room fights endanger teen hockey players: expert

By JAMES KELLER

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HALIFAX (CP) - Amateur hockey players are risking their health by staging secret locker-room boxing matches that can lead to concussions and other serious injuries, a medical expert says.

A game called "helmets and gloves" - also known as locker boxing - is a "time-honoured test of manhood" that poses a significant danger, says an editorial in the latest issue of the Clinical Journal of Sport Medicine.

"It's a concussion that could be prevented," says Dr. Kevin Gordon of Dalhousie University, the article's lead writer. "The editorial should really be a call to arms for parents to discuss it with their kids, for coaches to discuss it with their athletes. If everyone's aware of it, we can take some action."

Participants wear hockey gloves and helmets and square off until a helmet is knocked off.

The matches, which aren't always restricted to the locker room, are usually little more than horseplay that don't result in serious injuries. But in more severe cases, Gordon says, the fights last until one of the opponents ends up unconscious on the floor.

Gordon first learned about the game about three years ago when treating a 15-year-old hockey player for a concussion.

The boy told Gordon that he and a group of teammates staged a helmets-gloves match in an empty locker room. He was knocked out after a hard punch to the head.

While he missed two days of school because of the head injury, he played his next hockey game.

"The concerns come with getting injured when you're currently concussed, and that's where the danger lies," says Gordon. "These are unregistered and unrecognized concussions, and in each one of our cases, they went back to play the very next day."

Gordon's study examined two more cases in the Halifax area - including a 14-year-old girl knocked unconscious and hidden from a hockey coach who came into a hotel room to check on the team.

He also looked at Internet message boards and video postings. He found cases involving both hockey and lacrosse players ranging from early teens to early 20s across Canada and the United States.

Gordon has treated at least five cases in the past three years, and he says the children's hospital where he works has seen a recent increase in cases.

The jump, Gordon says, is because doctors at the IWK Health Centre in Halifax now ask teens with head injuries if they play helmets and gloves - something he says all doctors should be doing.

"What you don't know can't hurt you, so (teens) don't tend to tell adults about this activity," says Gordon.

Andrew Vaughan, a 16-year-old who plays hockey in the Halifax area, admits playing helmets and gloves.

He says while he's heard stories of players getting seriously injured, the worst he's seen is a bloody nose.

"There's no real attempt to hurt anybody," says Vaughan. "It's hard to get hurt, because you've got the helmet on and you're pretty protected."

That's precisely the attitude that can lead to serious concussions, says Gordon.

"A number of hockey players feel that there's no chance of a brain injury if you wear a helmet," says Gordon. "But there hasn't been a helmet designed yet which can significantly prevent a concussion."

Canadian amateur hockey rules forbid such behaviour and outline close supervision procedures.

But Gordon says more should be done to monitor hockey players off the ice and stress the dangers of helmets and gloves.

Glen McCurdie of Hockey Canada, which regulates minor hockey, says Gordon's article has prompted the organization to discuss the issue at its annual general meeting this weekend in St. John's, N.L.

"It's something that we've known to exist in certain forms," says McCurdie, who insists the game isn't common. "I understand the secretive nature of it, but I still think if there was serious enough injuries, we would be involved in some perspective."

McCurdie says it's not clear what, if anything, will come of out this weekend's Hockey Canada meeting.

"We do have policies and procedures in place, but that doesn't mean that we can't take an incident like this and highlight it," says McCurdie.