

# Waterloo Chronicle

Tuesday, October, 25, 2011 - 10:10:30 AM



## **Jordan Ercit Photo**

Canadian Hockey League neuropsychological consultant Dr. Michael Czarnota, right, talks to Waterloo midget girls' house league assistant coach Dave Harold last week during a concussion workshop at RIM Park.

## **Taking head hits to heart**

**Waterloo girls' minor hockey concussion workshop an "eye-opener" for coaches**

**By Jordan Ercit, Chronicle Staff**

Even with its ban on body checking, girls' hockey is not immune to concussions.

Dave Harold has seen it first-hand, both as an assistant coach with his Waterloo Girls' Minor Hockey Association midget house league team and as a parent with his 14-year-old daughter, Kendra, a bantam rep player for the Waterloo Ravens.

Harold said there was nothing illegal with the hit that sidelined his daughter with a concussion. She happened to turn around at the wrong time and collided face-to-face with another female hockey player who was changing directions as well.

"The problem is they don't know how to take a hit because they were never taught how to, and most of the time it's accidental contact between players who are going for the puck," Harold said. "That or they collide with a teammate in practice."

That's why last week's concussion workshop, hosted by the WGMHA at RIM Park, was such an "eye-opener" for Harold. The seminar, mandatory for coaches, trainers, managers and bench staff for Ravens rep and house league teams, gave Harold and about 230 other parents and youth hockey volunteers guidelines on how to identify and manage a concussion properly.

Harold took a special interest in the keynote speech by Dr. Michael Czarnota, tracking down the Detroit-based neuropsychological consultant for the Canadian Hockey League afterward for extra insight.

Czarnota, who has been active in concussion management for more than a decade, said it's important to properly assess concussions the moment they happen and ensure players are symptom-free before they return to practice with a structured and regimented plan.

"Very bad things can happen to young players if they go with a brain injury that's untreated, and we don't want to have irreversible problems," Czarnota said. "We want to keep them in the game as long as possible and if we do it right from the start, we'll do just that."

That means understanding the various signs and symptoms of head injuries, which among others include impaired memory, lack of co-ordination, confusion, nausea, headaches and sensitivity to light, and ensuring someone who suffers a concussion gets proper medical attention.

With about 10-15 per cent of players per team, per season experiencing a concussion, it's something coaches and trainers are guaranteed to face at least a couple of times per year, Czarnota said.

There is no surefire guideline for returning from a concussion as well. A player's history, age, persistence, severity and frequency of concussions can affect their recovery from a head injury.

Sidney Crosby's absence from the NHL has been an "unfortunate but exquisite example of what it takes to do the right thing," Czarnota. The NHL superstar has been out of hockey since January after sustaining a pair of hits to the head, and he only recently began participating in full-contact practices after passing each step in his recovery symptom free.

"Don't make concussions a toughness issue," Czarnota said. "It's not about being tough if you're hurt with a concussion, it's about being smart.

"You need to be honest, come forward with your symptoms, let somebody know about them and we'll take care of them the right way."

At the women's level, the Ontario Women's Hockey Association has increased punishment for illegal hits to the head, including cracking down on contact to the face and neck area as well as introducing escalating suspensions for players with a history of illegal hits.

In addition to education, OWHA president Fran Rider said the association is also preaching respect for other players, "because you can't play the game without another team and you can't play the game alone."

But despite the OWHA's best efforts, accidents happen. Like Harold, Kylie Baldin knows first hand about that as well.

The 18-year-old Conestoga College student suffered a concussion in the same manner as Harold's daughter when she chased down a loose puck during practice with her midget BB team and hit the side of her head on the ice.

Baldin, who had a burst eardrum and developed Bell's palsy as a result of the collision as well, struggled with post-concussion symptoms such as pounding headaches and sensitivity to light. It curtailed her ability to concentrate in the classroom at Waterloo Collegiate Institute.

Two years later, Baldin is finally coming to grips with life after hockey and accepted that she will no longer be able to play a game that was a huge part of her life growing up.

Listening to Czarnota last week, she was reminded of her former coaches, who wanted Baldin to recover completely from her concussion before attempting a return to the ice.

"Because of my coaches, it made it easier for me to let go of hockey," said Baldin, a guest speaker during the workshop's panel discussion. "It comforted me to know that they cared about me more than the game