



## **Improving Player Welfare in Hampshire Clubs**



In the report "RU Safe? A survey in Hampshire's Clubs", in September 2018, we looked at the progress on conclusions from a previous study ("Headcase in Hampshire: A Learning Journey for Concussion Reporting") in our continuing focus on the consistent application of more effective Post-injury Return to Play Management Processes in the County's clubs, in conjunction with players, parents, students and staff at schools, colleges and universities. In the last 5 years, as the pandemic has come and gone, we have continued to work on our player-centred approach and our focus has not wavered from our quest for continuous improvement.

After the release of the Government's UK Concussion Guidelines for Grassroots Sport in April 2023, the RFU has updated Graduated Return to Activity and Sport (GRAS) guidance which has been implemented by Hampshire RFU ahead of the 2023 – 2024 season in accordance with the now fully mandated Regulation 9 (Player Welfare, Emergency First Aid and Immediate Care Provision). During the last two seasons, we have gathered important data sets to help our clubs and Constituent Body (CB) members better understand the nature of injury reporting, and the trends for common injuries, and the positive impact of consistent and considered care for our injured players their return to play.

The hard work during these previous 2 seasons of preparation has allowed us to:

- Support the development of an assigned RugbySafe Lead (RSL) in each club, who understands the role is club-wide (adults and youth players), and to help these individuals manage their own group of qualified, trained Emergency First Aiders at their club. All Club RSL's agree it has been **vital** to maintain a good liaison between the Club RSL/Senior Physio where one is in place with respect to injury reporting/recording and management of return to play, particularly when monitoring trends in injuries from youth to adult rugby.
- Provide support and additional continuous training opportunities for all volunteers and professional staff who undertake the role of Emergency First Aider in Hampshire's clubs (over 500 volunteers have now accessed the two online sessions, "Managing Pitch Side First Aid" and "Managing Post-Injury Return to Play", with overwhelmingly positive feedback.)
- Rehearse and refine the processes and practices which have been adopted in our clubs with respect to making injury recording and reporting efficient,

effective and compliant with Regulation 9. In response to clubs asking for an easier-to-access system for reporting confirmed concussions, the online tool ProActive App is now being used very effectively by many of Hampshire's clubs. This has saved hours of volunteer time and is proving a very useful tool for reporting injuries including concussions via a phone app pitch side.

- Adopt the new GRAS protocol seamlessly, updating HRFU paperwork ready for the new season and advising Club RSL's of the changes quickly and productively
- Identify solutions to situations which may occur where there is no suitably qualified cover for any particular match or training session, so that rugby can always be supported to continue in these situations – a flowchart of steps to be taken where no qualified Emergency First Aider (EFA) is available has been circulated, and this season a trial First Aid Society is being launched whereby early and effective match preparation can quickly identify EFA availability and, if necessary, a qualified EFA can be appointed by the CB to the match or event as needed. This fulfils the aspirational objective that no rugby in Hampshire is lost due to EFA unavailability. A report on the success of this trial will be completed at the end of the 2023 – 2024 season.

Application of new GRAS Guidelines has enabled:

- The continued tight, 48-hour window of concussion reporting that has allowed the protocol to be most effective, so that all parties can be adequately informed
- A fuller, more supportive explanation of the 14-day rest period which follows the concussive injury, allowing players and coaches to better manage their individual recoveries and tailor their return to gradual physical activity.

**The new GRAS Guidelines** – and a layman's explanation of recovery from concussion.

There is no such thing as a "mild" concussion. That's a bit like saying someone is "a bit" pregnant. Your brain's axons are either disrupted or they aren't. And if they are, they just need a rest to repair themselves – they are very good at that, if we give them a chance to do so.

Think of a concussion like this: in your brain are loads of nerve pathways (like a network of roads) with many connections (like road junctions) along which nerve impulses (think of these as the vehicles on the roads) travel to destinations all over your body. These impulses (vehicles) are assisted by chemical signals (like traffic lights at a junction) and chemical substances (like loads on those vehicles) so they always go to the correct destination in the body and make the right thing happen. In a concussion, the impact of the shake or trauma to the head disrupts the surface of these roads: this makes travel difficult. Traffic lights are temporarily broken, vehicle

loads are spilled all over the roads, cars are stranded, have to take detours which sometimes lead to a dead end or to the wrong place.... these effects (of a disrupted road system) are the symptoms of concussion...no wonder they are so varied and sometimes so difficult to spot.

The good news is, the brain and body are extremely good at repairing the road surfaces and returning the traffic flow to its normal efficiency – as long as we don't continue to damage the road surface. So – we take an early cognitive rest (minimum 24 hours, no screens, no alcohol, to allow the road repair team to assemble and make a plan) and some physical rest with gradual return to daily activities/light exercise (over 14 days, so the road repairs have time to complete satisfactorily). At the beginning of a GRAS, it's important to wait until any obvious concussive symptoms have resolved before you start the 14 days physical recovery – so your initial 24 - 48 hours cognitive rest may be followed by a few more days managing headaches, dizziness or other symptoms. Only once these symptoms have resolved can the road repairs can begin.

After the 14 days physical recovery, we then have a graduated return to play over 7 more days (for adults or children), to allow an extra chance to be absolutely certain of the repair and ensure gradual return to good physical conditioning.

Towards the end of this third week, we can test the road surface is fully repaired, check all vehicles have been properly recovered, and traffic lights are all working properly again, by putting the player through a short but intense physical and cognitive stress test. This assessment can be easily undertaken by a qualified coach and a qualified Emergency First Aider working together with the player and a partner. The Stage 5 test is deliberately intense as we want to test the road repairs under close management, to see if we can induce any residual symptoms at the end of the GRAS period, before we send the player back out into a full contact game – day 21 at the earliest.

After the Stage 5 has been undertaken, we must monitor for any residual symptoms recurring – it's important to explain that players need to be very honest with themselves (and with you) at this point. If there are any returning symptoms at this stage, however mild, we can wait at least 48 hours again before we retake the test. This gives us the most confidence that we have done everything in our power to return our players safely to the game they are so desperate to get back to: the person/s delivering the Stage 5 should sign off the GRAS form once they are satisfied there is no return of symptoms beyond 21 days (minimum).

If, at any point during the whole process of rest and recovery those managing the process are in any doubt about any of the symptoms, they should not hesitate to prolong the rest/recovery period and/or recommend contacting a medical professional.

In terms of advice to First Aiders - be assertive, take the time you need to assess an injured player, if anyone is pressuring you to continue the game, ask the coach to

make a substitution to give you more time to assess the injury properly. Make sure you have a conversation about this with the Coaching team in advance so they support your decision-making at all times. Be prepared for a certain amount of resistance from the players themselves to be removed - again, be assertive and confident that they need to come off for 5 minutes for you to properly monitor them. Once their adrenalin ebbs away, they are more likely to be able to acknowledge their symptoms (if they have them.) At no point should a referee, coach or parent (or anyone other than the appointed First Aider) make a decision to assess an injury and allow a player to continue without the advice of the First Aider.

Have confidence in applying the GRAS – knowing that it is always better to apply a GRAS and get it wrong, than NOT apply a GRAS and get it wrong....

The pitch side experience is the most important judgement – what did you see?

We can all feel a bit uncomfortable about the final accountability to accept responsibility for the decision to apply a GRAS – it has implications for the player (different amounts of physical activity for 2 weeks, no rugby for 3 weeks....) and potential resistance from players and parents – but poorly managed concussions and worse, second impacts, have much greater implications for players.

Our Emergency First Aiders have a very important role in that respect:

If in Doubt, Sit them Out.

Its Official.

### **Acknowledgements:**

Many thanks to all 40 of Hampshire's Club RugbySafe Leads, who have worked incredibly hard over the last 20 months to ensure every aspect of pitch side care has been thoroughly reviewed at their respective clubs; hundreds of new volunteers who have stepped up and taken the required training to undertake the essential role of Emergency First Aider on training and match days; and also the 500+ EFA's who have given up hours of their time to attend additional developmental sessions to increase their knowledge and confidence in applying their skills pitch side.

It feels like the players in Hampshire are all in very good hands.

See you on the touchline,

**Michele Amos**

**Hampshire RugbySafe Lead**