Dr. Alex Hishaw is a specialist in traumatic brain injury, including concussion, and is medical director of the Southern Arizona VA Health Care System's polytrauma program, designed for service men and women returning with injuries from Iraq and Afghanistan. He is an assistant professor of neurology and psychiatry at the UA, where he completed his residency training and a fellowship in behavioral neurology.

Not surprisingly, Hishaw is following closely the controversy surrounding chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE, a condition known to cause a potentially fatal form of dementia in football players who have suffered repeated concussions.

Hishaw also loves football. And he believes that teens and young adults can benefit greatly from playing the game.

"I'm from the Midwest. I'm from Kansas City, Missouri. I grew up on football. I played football when I was in high school, for a couple of years.

"I think that having that experience and actually enjoying football, that may play a part in the way I look at things," Hishaw says. "I think we always have to look at the benefits versus the risks. And, unfortunately, one of the problems with CTE is that right now we don't really understand the risks. Is it the repeated hits? Is it the age when injuries occur? Is there a genetic predisposition? We don't know yet.

"And one of my concerns is that with the information we have, we may be causing fear in people who don't need to be afraid. I have patients who come to see me who don't really know what a concussion is, or what traumatic brain injury is, but they are worried about the possibility of having CTE because they hear about it on television. When I hear this, to me, this is an opportunity for education."

Research is essential to a better understanding of CTE, Hishaw says.

"But so far, the diagnosis of CTE is made only after autopsy," he says. "After the person has passed away and the pathology has been identified, we have to go back and ask the family and friends and associates about that person's behaviors, how that person was performing in life, and that's not the best science. The best science is prospective, not retrospective. So until we can do a better job of finding prospective data, I think CTE is going to remain controversial.

"One of the things I try to instill in the individuals I'm following, who we believe might be at risk for CTE, is to follow these individuals very closely, so that when there are mood changes, or cognitive changes or behavioral changes, that someone is aware of it and they have someone they can reach out to. Then possibly we can do something to avoid a tragic ending."
Most of the controversy surrounding football is focused on NFL players, particularly those who are disabled, or have died from game-related injuries. But questions also have been raised about letting children and teens play the game.

"In children you're always thinking about how the injury impacts the development of the brain, how it impacts how the brain continues to grow over time," Hishaw says. "In adults, we think the brain already has grown, as best we know. So we're looking at how does this impact their current functioning without as much thought to changes in the future.

"But some of that is changing. Back when I was a medical student, the thinking was once you became an adult, your brain was formed and everything from there on out was kind of downhill. Now we know that's not true, that the brain is constantly changing. So this neuroplasticity is one of the things we're looking at with people who have had concussions."

As a husband and father of three, Hishaw has been asked if he would let his son, now 8, play football.

"I had a wonderful time playing football," he says. "The camaraderie, the learning, what it takes to be a good player? there's a lot to that. Also, rules changes have been put into place to better protec players and to better recognize when a player is injured. So I think I would be OK with his playing football. If he were to have an injury of any kind, whether it's a concussion or something else, we would have to have a talk. I would ask, is it worth the risk that you're putting yourself through? And we would go from there."

To read more about some of the concussion research being done at the UA, see the UANews article "UA-Built Concussion App in NCAA Competition" and the Arizona Telemedicine Program post "Telemedicine Scores a Touchdown: VGo Robot Helps Diagnose Concussion on the Football Field."

Hishaw also has written articles for the Banner ?University Medical Center website, including "Parents Ask: Should I Let My Kid Play Youth Football?" and "Does Wearing a Helmet During Certain Sports Matter?"

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