

Testimony of

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Committee on Education and Labor
United States House of Representatives

On
HR_, Protecting Student Athletes from Concussions Act
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My name is Alison Conca-Cheng. I am a 17 year old high school senior at Centennial High in Ellicott City, MD. I am an honors student, editor of my school newspaper, and an active volunteer in my community. I also love reading and hanging out with my friends. I would say I'm a pretty typical teenager.

I've been playing soccer my whole life - almost as soon as I could walk. This year was going to be my fourth year as a high school soccer player.

Until recently I was hoping to play Division III soccer in college. I was really looking forward to my senior season. But, the circumstances changed when I suffered a concussion on Friday, August 20th.

Practice was almost over and I was playing central midfield in an 11 versus 11 scrimmage.

I jumped up to head an approaching corner kick with the right side of my head. I don't remember anything that followed. I was told later that my friend and teammate, Lauren, had also gone up for the ball and that we had collided. Judging from the bruise I later found up and down the right side of my thigh, I assume I landed on that side of my body and that I hit the ground hard. The next thing I remember is sitting up unsteadily to see my teammates huddling concernedly around me. My vision had gone very blurry and I had severe tunnel vision for several seconds. Everything looked black around the edges. I was helped off the field and soon my vision cleared a bit. I sat out the rest of practice.

Immediately after the collision and for the rest of the day I discovered that I was having severe balance problems. Even with the slightest nudge it was a struggle not to fall down. I also had a lingering headache as well as fairly constant dizziness. Later that day, my boyfriend said I seemed fairly dazed and confused, and I noticed that my mind often drifted from the conversation or situation. I just felt out of it. It's hard to explain if you've never experienced it.

I arrived at the school the next morning and was given some preliminary tests by my school's athletic trainer. I was told I had to see a doctor and either be diagnosed with a concussion or be cleared. After a week of confusion with paperwork and forms, I was seen by my family doctor, who cleared me to play. Meanwhile, school had started and I was anxious to play. I thought I had fully recovered. The only thing standing in my way of the playing field was a computerized test.

Before the start of the season, all athletes at my school are required to take a baseline concussion test. It is a half-hour test that evaluates basic cognitive functioning by measuring memory and reaction time: remember the word, click when you see the green light, and so on.

About two weeks after I suffered the concussion, I took the first baseline test to see if I was functioning normally. I could tell that I didn't do very well. And I wasn't surprised when I was called back to the trainer to take the test a second time. Again, I knew I had done poorly. I just couldn't remember the words, patterns, and numbers they were asking me to remember. My trainer told me my test results were "inconsistent" with some significantly below my baseline.

Around this time I also started to notice other symptoms. The headaches lingered. And I began to forget things. Not just day to day, but morning to evening, or even moment to moment. My sleeping patterns changed. I slept more, feeling constantly tired, yet I had trouble falling asleep, a problem I'd never had in the past. School became more difficult once we started to delve into more complicated subjects. About 45 minutes into my hour-long class periods, my concentration would be completely gone and I would develop a splitting headache. This has been a big problem for me, as I am taking five Advanced Placement classes. Reading textbooks and articles for homework was particularly difficult. It would take me twice as long, and it would be a constant battle with my concentration.

Because of my “inconsistent” test results and reappearing symptoms, I was sent to Dr. Gioia. He ran several more detailed tests on me, and my results were still subpar. After a full examination, he explained that I was still actively in the recovery stage and that my headaches and concentration troubles were indications that I was overtaxing my brain. I was going to have to pay special attention, and any time a headache came on or my attention flagged substantially, I had to take a break and “cool off.” Homework would have to be limited to 30 minutes at a time with ten minutes of break.

Dr. Gioia wrote up a Care Plan for me that I brought to school. The school and my teachers have been extremely understanding and accommodating. Whenever I need to “cool off” my brain, I can go to the nurse’s office and I have gotten extensions on reading assignments. These adjustments have helped. But with the added time it takes to do my homework and the mandated breaks, schoolwork now dominates my evenings and weekends.

I’m glad to say that I’m feeling better and making progress. I appreciate the support I’ve received from family, friends and the best high school in America...Centennial. I’m grateful that my school had a system in place to identify the severity of my injury and point me toward the medical care I’ve required. I’m glad the committee is focusing attention on this issue. I have seen how it has impacted my life, and I worry about the student-athletes who don’t get properly diagnosed and fall through the cracks.