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The Alzheimer's Whisperer: Dealing with dementia caused by brain injuries due to contact sports

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Football is as American as apple pie.

For many, it's as much a tradition at Thanksgiving as turkey, and as popular on New Year's Day as champagne. It's a contact sport, much beloved for winning "hail Mary" passes and spectacular plays on both offensive and defensive sides of the game.

Yet despite all the protective equipment added over the years, those playing the game can get hurt. Some of the injuries are clear—a broken bone, torn ligaments—but some of them are much less obvious, particularly those involving brain trauma.

I want to shed light on a form of dementia that is rarely discussed: CTE, or Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy.

In short, it's a form of dementia caused by brain trauma, or physical injury and it's most common among those engaged in contact sports. Football is just one on a long list, as is boxing where the term punch drunk originated. No contact sport is immune to brain injury—world football or soccer, rugby, basketball, hockey, and even rodeo are all on the list.

CTE, however, it's not as simple as a brain injury that results in a memory impairment. It is much more complex, caused by repetitive brain trauma, resulting in a condition that is degenerative.

Like Alzheimer's disease, CTE becomes worse over time. And, like Alzheimer's disease, there is no known cure, it cannot be reversed, and it cannot be diagnosed definitively until after death through brain tissue analysis.

However, there is now ample post-mortem research to confirm its existence. The challenge is for those suffering with the disease now, and how they and their families have to deal with its many dimensions.

In addition to the realities of daily living, CTE sufferers are often younger with families to provide for and full lives to lead. They suddenly find themselves saddled with massive hospital bills, degenerating short-term memory, unexplained outbursts of anger and self-destructive behavior, and more.

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Many, such as former Pittsburgh Steelers player Mike Webster, show signs of mental illness ending in homelessness, as dramatized in the 2015 film "Concussion."

I recently had the pleasure and privilege of interviewing George Visger, who played for the San Francisco 49ers in 1980 and 1981.

During a game with the Dallas Cowboys in 1980, George sustained a concussion. Team medical staff administered numerous smelling salts during that game, and he went on to never miss a play or practice. In the following 1981 Super Bowl season, Visger developed hydrocephalus, often called water on the brain, but is actually a buildup of fluid in cavities deep inside the brain.

Visger underwent three emergency ventriculoperitoneal, or VP shunt brain surgeries in eight months. He was given last rites and the massive hospital bills for his treatment at the age of 23.

In my interviews with Visger, he discusses his struggles and successes with dementia and how he has developed mechanisms to assist with his memory loss, including writing everything down in spiral notebooks. He never goes anywhere or talks with anyone without these notebooks, which have effectively become his short-term memory.

Visger also discusses his legal battles with the National Football League and its insurance company, which fought with what was the law firm representing him called a, "scorched-earth litigation policy."

Despite Visger's massive hospital bills, personal issues brought on by his condition, struggles with ineffective dementia medications, and ongoing health issues, the former NFL player's legal case was not decided until 2016 when the California Court of Appeal rejected a final appeal in 2016, 35 years after the documented onset of his condition.

Visger continues to be a motivational speaker and fights for player's rights.

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He used holistic and nutrition-based approaches to wean himself off the many medications he was prescribed to unsuccessfully combat his progressive memory impairment. And he is a delight to interact with—now that his symptoms are more under control. I encourage everyone to listen to the podcast interviews with George at familyconnectcare.com/dementia-podcast to hear more.

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Lauren Mahakian is a certified dementia practitioner/ care manager and offers a free podcast, Unlocking the Doors of Dementia™ with Lauren. Visit familyconnectcare.com for more information.

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