

**1<sup>st</sup> March 2016**

To:

Anne Longfield OBE, Childrens Commissioner for England  
Professor Sally Holland, Children's Commissioner for Wales  
Tam Baillie, Children's Commissioner for Scotland  
Koulla Woasouma, Children's Commissioner for Northern Ireland  
Dr. Niall Muldoon, Ombudsman for Children for Northern Ireland

Professor Dame Sally Davies, Chief Medical Officer for England  
Dr Ruth Hussey OBE, Chief Medical Officer for Wales  
Dr. Catherine Calderwood, Chief Medical Officer for Scotland  
Dr Michael McBride, Chief Medical Officer for the Republic of Ireland

Rt Hon Nicky Morgan, Secretary of State for Education for England  
Huw Lewis AM, Minister for Education and Skills in Wales  
Rt Hon Angela Constance, Secretary of State for Education and Lifelong Learning for Scotland  
John O'Dowd MLA, Minister for Education in Northern Ireland  
Jan O'Sullivan, Minister for Education for the Republic of Ireland

Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt, Secretary of State for Health for England  
Rt Hon Shona Robison, Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Sport in Scotland  
Mark Drakeford AM, Minister for Health and Social Services in Wales  
Simon Hamilton MLA, Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety in Northern Ireland  
Leo Varadkar, Minister for Health for the Republic of Ireland

Rt Hon John Whittingdale, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport in England  
Ken Skates AM, Deputy Minister for Culture, Sport and Tourism in Wales  
Jamie Hepburn MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing & Sport in Scotland  
Carál Ní Chuilín MLA, Minister for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in Northern Ireland  
Paschal Donohoe, Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport in the Republic of Ireland.

## **Open Letter: Preventing injuries in children playing school rugby**

We, the undersigned, are sport scholars, academics, doctors, and public health professionals, who have become increasingly concerned about the harms and risks of injuries to children playing school rugby.

Our concerns are as follows. First, rugby is a high-impact collision sport. Studies show that the risks of injuries for those aged under 18 years are high and injuries are often serious.

Second, many secondary schools in the United Kingdom deliver contact rugby as a compulsory part of the physical education curriculum from age eleven.

Third, the majority of all injuries occur during contact or collision, such as the tackle and the scrum. These injuries which include fractures, ligamentous tears, dislocated shoulders, spinal injuries and head injuries can have short-term, life-long, and life-ending consequences for children.

Fourth, head injury and concussion is a common injury and repeat concussion is more likely when a player has a history of a previous concussion. A link has been found between repeat concussions and cognitive impairment and an association with depression, memory loss and diminished verbal abilities, as well as longer term problems. Children take longer to recover to normal levels on measures of memory, reaction speed and post-concussive symptoms than adults.

Fifth, studies show that injuries from rugby can result in significant time loss from school. Rugby injury, disillusionment with the game and interference with education, are the most common reasons for children giving up rugby.

We are also concerned about the government's plan in England to increase participation in rugby in schools. Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 17), governments have a duty to inform children about risks of injury. Yet, in the absence of a comprehensive system for injury surveillance and primary prevention this cannot occur.

Also under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 19), governments have a duty to protect children from risks of injury: "States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment...". As a party to the Convention, the UK must ensure the safety of children.

These evidence-based concerns lead us to consider it necessary to remove the collision elements of the school game so that children play touch and non-contact rugby. Within your respective countries, we therefore request:

- a) the Chief Medical Officers to advise the Ministers and Childrens' Commissioners in accordance with the evidence;
- b) the Childrens' Commissioners to protect children from the risks of harmful contact in school rugby; and
- c) the Ministers to remove the tackle and other forms of harmful contact from school rugby.

We look forward to hearing from you.

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