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## Using His Clinical Background to Protect Student-Athletes

**By Tiffani Sherman**

In clinical medicine, a physician usually cares for a few patients at a time. But Brian Hainline, MD, is caring for 450,000 all at once.



**Brian Hainline, MD**

Hainline is the first-ever chief medical officer for the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). In this role, created in early 2013, he is responsible for creating best practices to protect the student athletes who play 23 sports across three divisions.

“As a new position, I get to shape it,” Hainline said. “The goal is to be out in front and not be reactive.”

The former Notre Dame tennis star left a neurology and pain management practice near New York City to work for the NCAA. He commutes back and forth from New York to the NCAA headquarters in Indianapolis and spends many days on the road.

“I travel so much, it doesn’t matter where my home is,” he said. “I spend a lot of time going to member schools. It’s good to get a sense of what is happening on the ground level.”

Since taking the job, Hainline has visited about 50 schools. He usually meets with the school’s athletic staff, everyone from the athletic director to the strength and conditioning coaches. “The people on the ground level are really dealing with the student athlete day in and day out,” he said. “You hear certain themes that leads to change.”

One of Hainline’s goals as chief medical officer is to help change the country’s youth sports culture. At one time, young people played many different sports. Now athletics have become more professionalized, with kids picking one sport and playing it year round.

That one-sport culture leads to an increase in repetitive use injuries, Hainline said.

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“Kids before puberty should be playing multiple sports. We’re trying to shift the focus back to developing the athlete as a child and not a specialized athlete,” he said. “What happens is you become specialized and don’t become a well-rounded athlete.”

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Hainline is also concerned with how little physicians and others know about concussions. Recently, the NCAA and the Department of Defense announced a joint study aimed at protecting the safety of student athletes and service members. But the NCAA is not going to wait until the study is complete to make changes, Hainline said. New guidelines for dealing with concussions should be out in the fall.

“What we’re really doing is shifting so we’re out in front and not being reactive,” he said. “Our vision is to become the preeminent sports science institute and we hope to be the steward of best practices.”

Creating change in an organization like the NCAA is not a one-person job and does not always happen quickly. For a physician like Hainline, who is used to making quick decisions, it took a bit of an adjustment. Hainline makes suggestions, but it is up to the NCAA’s Committee on Competitive Safeguards and Medical Aspects of Sport to change policies and procedures. Representatives from the member institutions sit on the committee and have ultimate authority.

Unilateral decisions are not possible, which is a change for many physicians.

“It’s a radical departure from the day-to-day practice of clinical medicine,” Hainline said. “I have to get buy-in from the member institutions. It is a shift and you have to be exceedingly patient.”

The culture of the NCAA did not come as a complete surprise to Hainline since he already had experience in the field of sports medicine policy. For many years, he volunteered on committees and worked part-time as a physician for the United States Tennis Association.

Hainline said getting involved by volunteering to be part of a committee or as a team physician for a school or team can be a way for clinical physicians to branch out and find something outside of their comfort zone.

“You never know what’s going to happen after that,” he said. He shifted from neurological oncology to sports medicine as a result of a phone call from someone he worked with through his committees.

Hainline still stays involved in clinical medicine by working in a clinic three days a month. “It’s near and dear to my heart,” he said.

It also gives him more credibility. “It’s like a university president still teaching a class,” he added. “It puts you in touch with the people on the ground level.”

Hainline hopes his new position will help him create lasting change in the NCAA. A large majority of kids drop out of organized sports at age 14 because of injury or pressure to succeed. Sport shouldn’t be about being the best or getting a college scholarship, he said.

“It’s about character building and it’s about having fun,” Hainline said. “My biggest hope is that the NCAA with its name recognition becomes the leader in making a societal shift in sports.”

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