

WESTERN NEWS

Violence no longer “part of the game”

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CBC's *Hockey Night in Canada* personality Don Cherry has built a career on celebrating fighting in hockey. But in light of a public growing less and less tolerant of sports violence, even the colourful commentator has been forced to back down.

Cherry apologized last weekend on *Coach's Corner* for comments he made about three former 'tough guy' National Hockey League players who have become critical of fighting in hockey. He called the men “hypocrites” and “pukes” for drawing connections between drug and alcohol use with the on-ice fighting.

Cherry's comment's highlight the need to make violence in sports a public discussion.

When two hockey players erupt into a brawl on the ice, the crowd cheers. But the consequences of the fight, particularly if a hit results in a concussion, are typically dismissed as 'part of the game.'

Experts on violence in sports and the media are gathering at The University of Western Ontario today and Friday to discuss what happens “When Violence Becomes Entertaining.” The two-day conference, held in the Faculty of Education, is targeted at those working in elementary and secondary schools, psychologists, social workers, parents and community agencies working with children and adolescents.

Fighting in hockey has been a much-debated issue – often focused around whether it should be eliminated from the game or not. But when a concussion benched one of the NHL's most popular players, Sidney Crosby, and the news of recent deaths of some of hockey's most notorious enforcers, it has seemingly sparked a cultural shift on the issue.

“I believe the pendulum is shifting. We are seeing a cultural shift toward revulsion about violence in sports. But, there is a lot of work still to be done,” says Dr. Charles Tator, neurosurgeon and founder of ThinkFirst, a national foundation dedicated to the prevention of brain and spinal cord injuries.

As professor of neurosurgery at the University of Toronto and neurosurgeon at the Toronto Western Hospital, Tator has seen the consequences of violence in sports first-hand, including major disabilities to death. He is participating in a discussion panel today to examine how young people are impacted by the increasing level of violence in sports and its promotion in the media.

“Violence sells tickets and gains attention from a specific segment of the population. It also turns off another segment, which I believe is larger,” he says, noting it is possible to reduce or eliminate violence in sports altogether.

“We hope to mobilize awareness of the ravages of violence in sports. You only get one brain. We must prevent the damaged brains of our players, all the way from those who are only 13 and disabled by sports violence to those who are older, such as all the NHL stars who have had to quit the game and are still suffering,” Tator continues.

The statistics of youth with concussions is very high, Tator says. For example, approximately 25 per cent of 18-year-old hockey players have concussions every season.

“We do not have a single reliable treatment for brain injury. Concussion is a brain injury. Prevention is the only cure,” he says.

Research suggests the link between media violence and aggressive behaviour is almost as high as the link between smoking and lung cancer, says Peter Jaffe, Faculty of Education professor and academic director of the Centre for Research & Education on Violence against Women and Children. It can also contribute to desensitization to violence, nightmares, and fear of being harmed.

“We are looking at this as sort-of a public health issue,” Jaffe says. “Not all children are affected the same way, but we know the average child in Canada is spending 42-45 hours a week consuming media, some of it is educational and some of it is graphic violence.”

Calling it a public health issue “means that the problem impacts significantly on the well-being of Canadians, and should be met by a public response, including education of health-care professionals and mobilization of public health personnel to counteract the problem,” adds Tator, noting there is also a role for government.

With the silence broken on concussions and the life-long related damage, Jaffe feels the sport – and society – has reached a tipping point on the issue. But the Goliath in the room remains that violence in media is a multi-million dollar industry and it raises concerns about youth desensitization.

“When violence becomes entertainment, you stop reacting and responding to the daily acts of racism, sexism, bullying or threats,” Jaffe says.

But sports aren’t the only place youth witness violence.

A report by the American Academy of Pediatrics states the average young person will have viewed an estimated 200,000 acts of violence on television by the age of 18.

Video games, movies and the Internet have also become mediums for entertainment violence and many do not portray the human cost of such incidents. As well, violence in media is often consumed by youth without adult guidance or discussion, the report says.

“Media is a wonderful thing. Media educates and informs,” Jaffe says. “We are not down on media, but we are down on violent media that is using violence as a form of entertainment.”

The goal is to reach out to educators and those working directly with youth to raise awareness and promote media literacy. It is important to help youth better understand their role and responsibility in the issue, as well as the real-life consequences of violence. Parents also need to be aware of their children’s media consumption, Jaffe explains.

“I think we are trying to overcome people just passively accepting this as a way of the world and (feeling) we can’t change anything,” Jaffe says.

To see the complete conference program, visit [the conference website](#).