

Written evidence submitted by Dawn Astle

Dear Members of the DCMS committee.

Please see my statement regarding concussion and brain injury in sport.

My name is Dawn Astle.

My Dads name is Jeff Astle. He was a professional footballer. He was diagnosed with dementia when he was only 55. He died 4 years later.

My family donated my dads brain to research. 10 months later we attended a Coroners Court Inquiry into my Dads death. The pathologist described my Dads brain as looking like the brain of a boxer. He said there was trauma all the way through his brain. He believed this trauma was caused by the 'repeated' heading of footballs throughout my Dads career. HM Coroner said my Dads 'occupational exposure' had made at least a significant contribution to the disease that had killed him. The ruling was Industrial Disease.

My mum said to my sisters and I, "you're Dad can't possibly be the only one girls".

How right was she.

The FA and PFA told us that they were doing a longitudinal study (10years) on the effects on the brain by heading footballs. We thought they were taking this very seriously, as they should have... we were wrong.

12 years later we were contacted by a journalist who told us he couldn't find anything about the research. He'd contacted the FA /PFA and was met ' by a wall of silence '.

We started a campaign "Justice for Jeff".

We wanted answers as to why my Dad died, why his brain looked like the brain of a boxer, where was the promised research, are other footballers dying like my Dad, what about current footballers, future footballers , a ticking time bomb?

Greg Dyke the Chairman of the FA wrote to my Mum. He apologised, he said they hadn't done enough... why?

The research was put in a drawer and the drawer remained closed. It only appeared when we demanded to where it was. If we hadn't asked, it would still be sat in that drawer. It was finally published nearly 10 years after it ended. Is that even ethical ?

My Dads death didn't matter to football. It was swept under the carpet.

It would still be under the carpet if we hadn't shamed them (both FA and PFA)

We established a charity in my dads name The Jeff Astle Foundation. We had been contacted by so many families of footballers who had sadly already died of dementia or were living with the consequences of dementia.

It was very very clear within just a few months that football had a huge problem with dementia and it's former players.

Our meeting with Greg Dyke secured football commissioning research to answer that question. Have we got a problem with our former players. Are footballers at a higher risk of dementia.

The F.I.E.L.D.study had proven this. But this was 17 years after my Dad died.

What are they doing to try and reduce the risk ?

Why were warnings ignored ? (letters from doctor)

Why were concerns ignored ? (Baroness Murphy)

We have found literature and newspaper articles about the dangers of heading footballs going back to the early 1900's.

As soon as the FIELD study was published why didn't the FA/PFA immediately call for further research. Why did they wait over 16 months ?

Dragging their heels.... again.

Why no limits yet on heading in training ?

Football's priority has been the product of football, the priority should have been and should always be the welfare of the players. They have failed the players, they have failed my Dad and they have failed my family.

Football is a much loved sport for millions of people around the world, me included.

But for the players, it is just their job, and they should be afforded the same protection from known risks as anyone else in any other job.

We all know the benefits of sports participation, but catastrophic brain damage must never be seen as an acceptable consequence.

Football has not done enough.

We assumed incorrectly that the inquest ruling by HM Coroner of Industrial Disease, as a result of repeated heading of footballs during my dad's career would be a defining moment and the sport would react with vigour to protect future generations of footballers and help those past heroes who were dying and whose families many many of which were often facing collapse.

We assumed again incorrectly that the research that started in 2001 which was funded by The FA and PFA would address the most obvious 2 questions. How many footballers have got dementia or have sadly already died of dementia and is the game safe now?

It did neither.

In any other industry an inquest finding such as my Dad's would have had earthquake like repercussions for that particular industry, but not football, and I believe that it's privileged status of self governing is why.

I believe that government should take responsibility or have an overview of the dementia crisis in football.

A government group or a government appointed independent group to look into brain injury in football.

For almost 20 years football has failed to act and failed to protect its players, men , women and children at risk with no restrictions. Unprotected. Uninformed.

If sport is left to its own devices it will just do what it wants. If there was a body overseeing the sport 20 years ago saying you need to do this, or you need to be taking these steps, those steps would have been taken.

There needs to be a Brain Injury Trust in place to help past , present and future players with treatment, rehabilitation costs, neurological support and full time care costs.

This shouldn't be the responsibility of government and British tax payers to bail out football for its mishandling of the neuro degenerative disease crisis in the game.

It's football's problem and only people in your position as Members of Parliament have the power to hold football to account.

Football will continue, if enabled, to kick the can down the road and in the meantime players will continue to be at risk and players will continue to die.

On December 18th 2002 a month after my Dad's inquest head injuries were discussed in Parliament. Mr Adrian Bailey MP (West Bromwich West) spoke about my Dad and the ruling. He said " the Jeff Astle case marks an epic moment in the struggle to get recognition of the effects of heading ".

Dr Gibson said “ other players have sustained similar injuries, and they deserve respect and a response from government “

Please show my Dad and his colleagues respect.

My Dad choked to death in front of me , my Mum and my sisters.

Please think about that for 1 minute.

He choked to death because his brain had been destroyed. Destroyed because he was a footballer.

I don't want any other family to go through what my family went through, and continue to go through every day.

Please don't let my Dads death and all the other footballers deaths be in vain.

My Dad was my hero and my best friend. His death will haunt me forever.

Thankyou for your time

Kindest regards

Dawn Astle