

NFL Neuropsychological Concussion Evaluation Issues.

The NFL developed guidelines for neuropsychological evaluations for former players who are claiming compensation for long term effects from player related concussions. These guidelines cover the areas of testing required by board certified neuropsychologists who evaluate the ex-players. The areas of coverage in examinations are in line with traditional requirements for comprehensive evaluations of head injuries. However, there is a problem with one of the recommendations that speaks to potential racial biases.

The guidelines, which are sent to all approved evaluators, indicate that racially established norms be utilized in interpreting the bulk of the test findings. These are norms based on a set of about 500 individuals in the San Diego area who self proclaimed themselves as African Americans. The norms are not based upon a group of individuals from different areas of the country and have other issues that limit their utility, particularly in forensic settings. If used, they significantly limit the diagnosis of neuropsychological impairment in individuals assessed.

Very few evaluators seem to understand the limitations in the use of these norms and routinely refer to them in discussing findings from evaluations. This inherently reduces a player's ability to have an evaluation that results in a rating of impairment from a cognitive standpoint.

Evaluators do not typically seem to know that the guidelines for evaluations set by the NFL are not set in stone. At the very end of the lengthy guidelines, there is a brief statement that allows evaluators to use their judgment in selecting tests and norms for their evaluations.

This is a problem that has been discussed in the media, but has not come to a full resolution, as far as I can tell. Former players who are seeking neuropsychological evaluations should discuss this issue with evaluators before agreeing to proceed with evaluations.

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