

OPINION



Breaking the silence on brain injury

By David L. Goldin

What do Steve Young, Troy Aikman, Stan Humphries, Eric Lindros, Pat LaFontaine, Dale Earnhardt Jr., Chris Irwin, George Clooney and probably 20 percent or more of our troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, have in common? This is an increasingly important question; please take a moment to think about it before reading on.

They all suffered traumatic brain injury, or TBI. In addition to these football, hockey and NASCAR stars, there are numerous sports celebrities with TBI. Muhammed Ali is only the most famous. As the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention puts it: "Each year, about 300,000 sports-related traumatic brain injuries occur in our country, and most can be classified as concussions. Concussions can occur in any sport — and all are serious injuries."

Why is it then that traumatic brain injury is still referred to as the "silent epidemic"? If you were unsure of the answer to the question, you may realize there is not much news about TBI. But even if you know that these stars, athletes and many of our troops suffer from TBI, you may not recognize how prevalent and secretive TBI is.

Each year at least 1.4 million people in the United States sustain TBI. Often the embarrassment of feeling like a different person and the stigma associated with brain injuries account for the silence. Certainly most of the famous TBI survivors are not talking about their condition. One of the few exceptions is Bob Woodruff, the former ABC co-

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anchor, who suffered a severe TBI covering the war in Iraq. The Bob Woodruff Family Fund for Traumatic Brain Injury (www.bobwoodrufffamilyfund.org/about_brain_injury.shtml) addresses both TBI and PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and provides support for the brain-injured community, both military and civilian. Woodruff and his wife, Lee, exemplify what is needed to get the message out about TBI and its effects.

With so many being struck down by this injury, it remains puzzling that more attention is not given to the TBI epidemic. The brain-injury organizations across the nation, including our

Government statistics pertaining to TBI in the United States are reported by CDC. Of the 1.4 million people who sustain a TBI each year, 50,000 die, 235,000 are hospitalized and 1.1 million are treated and released from an emergency department. The number of those with TBI who are not seen in emergency or who receive no care is unknown.

No doubt this is a large number as most TBI is "mild," and sometimes the survivor does not even recognize that TBI is the reason for the changes in cognition, emotions and behavior. "Mild" TBI, as the term is often used in the medical profession, is mislead-

returning troops may be suffering from TBI.

Our returning service members may not know they have been injured but cannot account for changes in their cognition, behavior and personality. They may find themselves confused, irritable, restless, unmotivated, angry, unable to focus their attention, disorganized, lacking former judgment, slow in thinking, with memory deficits, depressed, and feeling "like a different person," and yet not realize this is caused by TBI. To top it off, they are often embarrassed and ashamed by their undiagnosed condition and desirous of returning to support their fellow soldiers. Someone suffering from TBI is not fit to play sports let alone fight a war.

According to the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center, the risks and costs of TBI to military personnel and veterans in combat are much higher than ever. Among veterans and service members from Iraq and Afghanistan treated at Walter Reed hospital for injuries of any type, about 65 percent have TBI as a primary diagnosis or simultaneous injury.

Clearly we owe it to our returning troops to pay attention to the most prevalent injury they suffer in fighting for our country. From a moral, economic and medical standpoint, we must deal with the reality of this devastating injury. We cannot ignore our returning troops and those other unfortunate survivors of TBI who often go undiagnosed and untreated for years because their TBI is "invisible."

It is time to break the silence of the TBI epidemic.

U-T Multimedia: For an interview with attorney David Goldin, go to SignOnRadio.com.

The San Diego Brain Injury Foundation's fundraiser for those suffering from injury is Sunday. For more information go to www.sdbif.org/2007FRSaveTheDate.pdf.

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San Diego Brain Injury Foundation, have been trying for years to raise awareness. The tragedy of brain injuries suffered by our brave troops affords a great opportunity to bring TBI out into the open so all survivors of TBI can get the diagnosis and treatment they deserve.

One of the great tragedies of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan is the unprecedented number of our troops suffering TBI, the "signature injury" of the war. The U.S. Senate recently passed its version of the Dignified Treatment of Wounded Warriors Act now being considered in the House of Representatives. This and other legislation in Congress would lift some secrecy surrounding TBI and provide resources for diagnosis and treatment of our brain-injured soldiers.

ing because these injuries can cause life-changing deficits and profound disabilities. As the term should be used, "mild" TBI means only that the brain injuries are not life-threatening, in contrast with moderate or severe TBI where without medical treatment the patient may die.

TBI statistics mostly focus on our civilian population and do not address TBI suffered in disproportionately large numbers by our soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. The most damaging weapon of the war, the improvised explosive device, or IED, is leaving this "signature wound" on our troops. Even when not knocked out by the blast, the forces unleashed by the explosion can leave permanent scars on our soldiers' brains without visible wounds. It is estimated that upward of 20 percent of our