Was It Just Another Ball to the Head?

Disclaimer: This case study was prepared by Jessie Nairn and Carrie Cheng under the supervision of Dr. Frances Tuer, DeGroote School of Business, solely for the purpose of discussion. While the injury in the case actually took place all details of person(s) and organization(s) have been disguised.

**The Injury/Illness:**

With the thrill of victory and cheers from fans and players echoing in his ears, Women’s Volleyball Assistant Coach, Bill Smith, headed back to his office; it had been a fantastic night. His team, the Women TigerCats had persevered to win a close fifth set (19-17) over the Black Panthers to take the match, and advance to the City Finals. However, the thrill was quickly being replaced with an intense headache and difficulty concentrating.

Bill wondered if it was a migraine from the all the stress associated with such a high stakes game. Bill’s emotions had been on a roller coaster throughout the very close match. The TigerCats had won the first set, unfortunately then dropped the second and third sets, only to fight back and win the fourth and fifth sets. Bill knew that his blood pressure had probably gone “through the roof” during the match.

But he then he recalled that during the last set a player on the opposing team had mis-hit the ball and it hit him in the back of the head. When he first got hit, Bill had laughed it off, but now, he had second thoughts - he couldn't focus on anything and was starting to feel nauseous, so he laid his head down on his office desk. In the back of his mind he wondered if it was more than just a migraine – had he suffered a concussion? He decided to see how he felt in the morning and drove himself home.

**Background Information:**

Bill Smith had been Assistant Coach of the TigerCats Women's Volleyball Team for just over years, after graduating from university with a degree in Kinesiology. Earlier that day Bill Smith had come up with what he thought was a can’t-be-beat starting line-up for the TigerCats Women's Volleyball Team. Bill’s players were looking forward to winning the match for Bill – they loved his energetic sideline pep talks and inspirational quotations during matches and before and after games.

During the match, the atmosphere had been electric; the gymnasium was packed with spirited fans, food and clothing vendors. Fans were treated to timeout events, half time entertainment, loud music and free swag, such as TigerCat towels and hats. The noise level made it hard to hear and Bill had to scream to communicate with his players. As he did every time his team played, Bill had taken his place on the sidelines, as close as he could get to the action, without actually stepping on the court. He was used to his players getting hurt - volleyball can result in a wide range of injuries - but never thought he would be the one who might come to harm from the sport that he loved.

**Background on this type of injury:**

A concussion is a form of mild traumatic brain injury, and usually happens because of a hit to the head, neck, face or another part of the body, causing the brain to move inside the skull and become injured. Most people who experience a concussion will have a full recovery within 10 days to 4 weeks. Children and youth typically take longer than adults to recover.

According to a 2017 Health and Safety Report produced by the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS), the number of time loss claims for work-related concussions increased by 371% in Ontario from 2004 to 2013. This increase is likely due in part to increased reporting and awareness of this injury. However, research shows that there is a general lack of understanding about concussion and how it is managed at the workplace.

In Canada, the highest rates of workplace concussions are in the transportation, storage, government, and primary industries (e.g. forestry, fishing, and mining). The most common cause of workplace brain injuries overall are falls, being struck by or against an object, and motor vehicle collisions.

The Canadian Athletic Therapists Association (CATA) states that "any athlete suspected of having a concussion should be removed from play, medically assessed, monitored for deterioration (not left alone), and should not operate a motor vehicle. According to the Code, problems could arise over the first 24-48 hours and victims must go to the hospital at once if signs or symptoms start to arise. Signs and symptoms include loss of consciousness, neck pain, nausea or vomiting, blurred vision, fatigue or low energy and instability. In addition, CATA strongly encourages that concussion management be under the supervision of a professional sport health practitioner such as a sports physician, a certified athletic therapist, and/or a neuropsychologist. Medical clearance must be given prior to return to play.

**What to do next?**

Bill Smith woke up the next morning with neck pain and balance problems, he decided he would have to consider his options. The first option was to do nothing; he could simply be suffering from a mild stress-related headache which could easily be resolved by taking some over-the-counter Ibuprofen and drinking lots of water. However, being familiar with concussion and concussion protocols he wondered if he should speak to someone else in order to obtain an opinion about the symptoms that he was currently experiencing. Stacy Lewis was the Athletic Therapist of the Tigercats volleyball team and had been around longer than Bill. Bill could easily approach Stacy and ask her to assess him hopefully on a confidential basis, give him a more definitive diagnosis, and provide some treatment advice. The last option, which was Bill's least preferred option, was going to the doctor himself. He was concerned that if he told his doctor about his possible concussion, he would be informed that he would not be allowed to coach at the upcoming City Finals, and his coaching career might be in jeopardy. Bill was torn – on the one hand he knew what he would tell a player he suspected of having a concussion, but he wasn’t a player – did the same rules apply? Would he get Stacy in trouble if he asked her to keep things “on the quiet”?