New Zealand’s Injury Prevention Research Unit: reducing sport and recreational injury

David J. Chalmers PhD
Injury Prevention Research Unit, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

The Injury Prevention Research Unit was established in 1990 to reduce the incidence, severity and consequences of injury. Research into sport and recreational injury is one of five major areas of research being undertaken. National data sources have been used to estimate the overall size of the problem and to describe the nature and circumstances of injury associated with a variety of sport and recreational activities. Analytical studies are now being undertaken to identify significant risk and protective factors. Research activity is being directed toward the development, implementation and evaluation of preventive measures.

Keywords: Epidemiology, prevention, recreation

The recognition that injury was a leading contributor to mortality and morbidity in New Zealand1 led to the establishment, in 1990, of the Injury Prevention Research Unit (IPRU) at the University of Otago. It is funded jointly by the Health Research Council of New Zealand and the Accident Rehabilitation and Compensation Insurance Corporation (ACC), administrator of New Zealand’s compulsory ‘accident’ compensation and rehabilitation scheme. Its primary aim is to undertake research that will contribute toward reducing the incidence, severity and consequences of injury in New Zealand. Research on sport and recreational injury is one of five major areas of research being undertaken by the IPRU.

Initially the IPRU was involved with describing the nature and extent of the injury problem, using existing data sources. New Zealand is comparatively well placed in this regard, in that – in addition to maintaining a national record of injury fatalities4 – it is the only country which maintains a national record of all hospital admissions for injury5 and also a national record of compensated claims for medical expenses, rehabilitation, loss of earnings and other costs to individuals sustaining injury. Nevertheless it remains difficult to identify the full extent of injury associated with sport and recreational activity. However, the available data sources suggest that there are on average seven fatalities, approximately 4500 hospitalizations and 92500 emergency depart-

Address for correspondence: David J. Chalmers, Injury Prevention Research Unit, Department of Preventive and Social Medicine, Medical School, University of Otago, PO Box 913, Dunedin, New Zealand
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While most of the research described above has used epidemiological methods, the scope of the IPRU’s research is expanding to include other disciplines such as health economics, biomechanics, rehabilitation and health promotion. Collaboration with other agencies is also playing an increasing role in the IPRU’s activities. The IPRU is well placed in this regard, with Dunedin being home to New Zealand’s only school of physical education and to the national secretariat of the New Zealand Federation of Sports Medicine.

Finally, it is important to note that the IPRU’s research activity is directed toward the development, implementation and evaluation of measures that will bring about a reduction in the incidence and severity of injury in New Zealand. In some cases, such as the research on playground and trampoline injuries, this involves input into the development of safety standards. In others, such as the study of rugby injuries, it involves close collaboration with the sport in interpreting the research findings and in developing preventive measures that will be acceptable to players, coaches and officials.

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