

American Idol, Jimmy Buffett, Football, Giffords and Iraq/Afghanistan

Unfortunately, they have one thing in common...

What do American Idol, Jimmy Buffet, football and Rep. Giffords all have in common? Answer: Brain injury and brain injury recovery.

Surprised? Brain injury and its aftermath in the US were front and center Wednesday and Thursday nights on the popular TV contest "American Idol." In a show which likes to highlight the difficult back-story of its talented contestants, Wednesday night's American Idol featured Chris Medina, whose engagement to his girlfriend of eight years Juliana Ramos, has been postponed as she is recovering from a traumatic brain injury sustained in a car accident. Anyone who saw her "before" photo and then the state she's in now on the Idol show would be moved by this couple's plight. Ramos, formerly a beautiful, young girl, is in a wheelchair, bobbing uncontrollably, with apparent paralysis on one side of her body suggested by the immobility of one side of her face.

According to the 2010 Centers for Disease Control "Traumatic Brain Injury in the United States" report, motor vehicle-traffic (MVT) is the leading cause of traumatic brain injury or TBI-related death for ages 20-24 and the second leading cause of TBI in all age groups at 17.3%.

Thursday night, on Idol, again, the last contestant, 15-year-old Lauren Alaina was singing for her cousin who had had a brain tumor and was the reason she was competing in the contest. Most of us are familiar with the term traumatic brain injury and associate it with brain damage. But a brain tumor is one of many causes of acquired brain injury including degenerative diseases like Alzheimer's, autoimmune diseases like MS, heart attack, stroke, electrocution, poisoning, and even eating disorders and substance abuse.

Wednesday night, Jimmy Buffett was hospitalized with a head injury after falling off the stage at a concert in Sydney, Australia. At the age of 65, Buffett is nearing the age groups most likely to die from traumatic brain injury and the age group most likely to sustain a head injury due to a fall.

During the Saints 2010 season, chain gang member, Al Nastasi Jr. standing on the sidelines, was knocked down by Saints player Courtney Roby and hospitalized for two weeks with a closed head injury. This was an anomaly--usually it's the

football players who are injured. Football is the sport with the second greatest number of head injuries in the US with 46,948 occurring in 2009. Further, a University of North Carolina study on college football players indicates the average college player sustains about 950 blows to the head in a single season.

In 2010, federal investigations into football player head injury have raised awareness of the need for football players from high school to the pros to consider concussive events differently. In the past, players who were knocked down or out, were counseled to get back out there and "tough it out." Since brain injury research has shown conclusively that subsequent concussive events can significantly deliver long-term damage to the brain such as susceptibility to depression and suicide and possible deficits such as memory loss, high school football coaches are now advised to have all first time players have baseline MRIs before playing to use as comparison in the event of concussion or a more severe traumatic brain injury. But with football, the most popular national sport in the US and millions of dollars at stake for players, coaches, team owners, and as we all know in New Orleans, for the host cities, bringing the brain injuries of team players to the forefront, even on the published injury lists, is not going to be a popular public relations tool.

Representative Gabrielle Giffords of Arizona, shot in the head by a probably mentally unstable man, has been in the news for weeks. Her neurosurgeons and neurologists have made statements as to her condition daily and she was recently transferred to TIRR in Houston for her rehabilitation. No definite prognosis for her recovery has been made because every person's brain injury recovery can be different depending upon location and severity of the injury of the brain and the level and quality of care given to the brain injury survivor. Unfortunately, Giffords' trauma has gotten more editorial from speculation about the political reasons for her shooting than on brain injury and brain injury recovery in the US today.

As medical technology has progressed, (and with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan providing on the job training), so have the techniques and abilities of surgeons and neurosurgeons to save patients who sustain a brain injury. Brain injury can occur either from a concussive event from blunt force to the head or trauma, or acquired from a medical event such as oxygen deprivation or from a vascular disruption such as an aneurysm. Twenty years ago, those with severe injuries to the brain probably would not survive. Today, many do and they and their loved ones are left with the incredibly long, difficult and expensive rehabilitation. Consider these statistics:

- 30% of soldiers admitted to Walter Reed Hospital have a form of TBI and 10-20% of Iraq vets have some form of TBI.
- In all age groups, falls are the leading external cause of TBI (35.2%).
- TBI was a contributing factor in 30.5% of all injury-related deaths in the U.S.

A 2010 report on TBI in the U.S. from the CDC concludes rates are going up for traumatic brain injury. In the previous 2004 report revised in 2006, the CDC estimated 1.4 million people sustained a TBI per year. Now, the figure is 1.7 million a year. With increased survival rates due to medical advances, the average lifetime costs for recovery from brain injury are between \$600,000 and \$1.8 million. For the U.S. as a whole, direct medical costs and indirect costs such as lost productivity of TBI are \$60 billion per year.

Claudia Osborn, a Michigan physician, TBI survivor, and author of "Over My Head: A Doctor's Own Story of Head Injury from the Inside Looking Out" summarizes the situation of TBI today in the CDC report, "Society is more likely to wage a battle against the ravages of traumatic brain injury if it understands how pernicious, pervasive, and huge the problem is. We are finding better ways to prevent injury and improve acute care. We who are injured may experience improvement both in function and in the quality of our lives when we have access to rehabilitation and support to develop and utilize our remaining strengths and abilities. Thus, TBI prevention, improved acute care and rehabilitation to reduce the likelihood of TBI-related disability, and also increased access to services for those who do not fully recover are critical to improving quality of life of persons following TBI."

You can make a difference in the lives of those recovering from brain injury by becoming a donor, sponsor, advertiser or volunteer for The Secret Gardens Tour in New Orleans, a fundraiser for brain injury recovery needs. Mark your calendar for this year's tour which will take place March 25 & 26, 2011 in Uptown New Orleans on St. Charles Avenue and Arabella, Hurst, Joseph and Octavia Streets. To purchase tickets, or for information on how you can help, go the website www.SecretGardensTour.org.