

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## The NFL Needs Distance From Its Brain-Injury Funding

By all means, keep funding concussion studies, but step back and let independent science take its course.

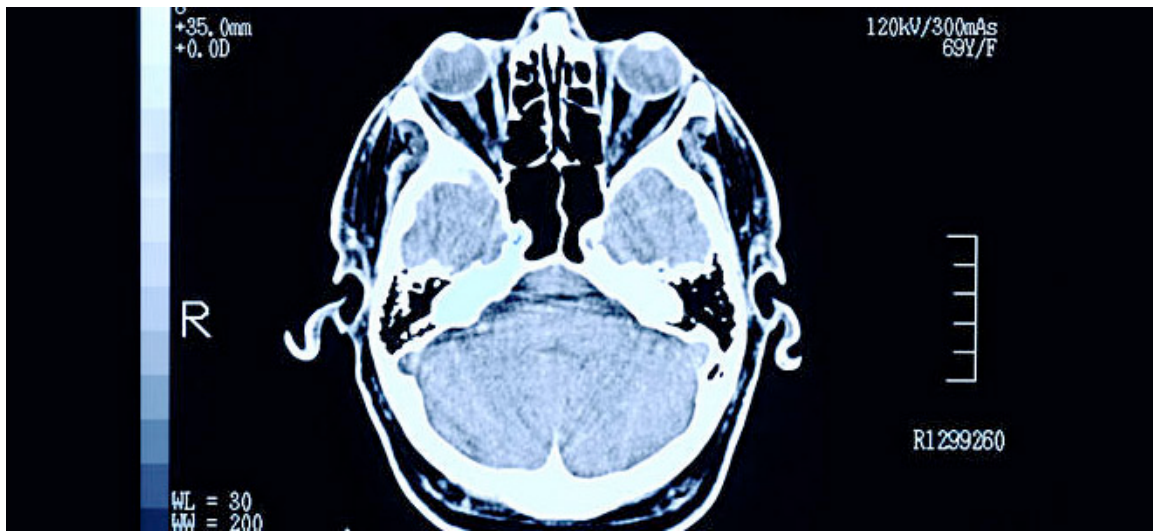


PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES  
By **ROGER PIELKE JR.**

Updated Feb. 21, 2016 7:18 p.m. ET

Super Bowl 50 between the Denver Broncos and Carolina Panthers was the second-most-watched TV program ever in the U.S., trailing only the previous Super Bowl. Last year almost 50 million people attended college football games. More than one million boys played high-school football, making it the most played high-school sport, a status it has had since data were first collected in 1969.

Despite its immense popularity among spectators and players, football is facing an existential threat due to the long-term health risks presented by repetitive injuries to the head. A new disease has even been associated with these injuries—chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE, the subject of the recent Will Smith movie, “Concussion.”

If the National Football League, the National Collegiate Athletic Association, high schools, players and parents are to make informed decisions about football, robust

evidence about the health risks of playing the sport is needed. However, much like other areas where science runs into politics, money and culture, securing a solid foundation of science in the context of football has proven problematic. It need not be so.

This month ESPN [reported](#) that the NFL and its partners have over the past several years become the nation's largest and most powerful funder of brain research, exceeding the National Institutes of Health. Such investments—totaling more than \$100 million—are commendable. Federal research dollars are limited, and despite the popularity and visibility of football, its risks directly affect far fewer people than other health concerns. But the role that the NFL has played in its largess has undercut the credibility of much of the scientific research into the risks of football, and thus compromises our ability to make the game safer for children, college students and professionals.

Evidence compiled by ESPN's "Outside the Lines" revealed that the NFL has favored some league-friendly scientists over others by directing where funding is awarded. There is a troubling association between views on the science of concussions and the closeness of relationship of some scientists with the NFL. Despite some funding going to independent researchers, one researcher quipped, "It felt like we were going back to the stage where the people who were funded by Big Tobacco were saying smoking is not harmful."

Securing reliable science to inform decision making has proved to be a vexing challenge in areas as diverse as climate change, military intelligence and health care. The issues are difficult because money and politics are involved, but also because scientists themselves can be compromised by interests. But it is possible to overcome this challenge.

The NFL should fund research—a lot of it. But it should do so in a completely hands-off manner. That would mean continuing to donate money to authoritative research bodies like those associated with the National Institutes of Health, but allowing a competitive research program to be run without any interference. Once the scientific agenda is set, the NFL must step back and allow the research to take place. Science agencies like those within the NIH have in place strict conflict-of-interest guidelines, and these should be employed rigorously to ensure that funding decisions are made by individuals who are open and transparent.

For independent advice the NFL needs to outsource its expert advisory process. The league's current Head, Neck and Spine Committee is an internal body which may serve important roles, but independence is not one of them.

Independent advice could be secured by asking the U.S. National Research Council to establish an advisory body. The NFL and NRC would negotiate the scope of the advice to be given, including the scientific questions to be addressed, and the NFL would pay for the committee's work, but its work would be overseen by the NRC completely independent of the NFL.

More broadly, if the NFL doesn't act to secure independent advice, Congress or the president could create a national commission on the "Future of Football" designed as an

honest broker to evaluate current science, to suggest future research directions and to generate alternative paths for the nation's most popular sport.

What we learn about the risks of football may not always be welcome or pleasant, but preserving what is loved by so many about the sport depends upon playing it straight with players and fans. That means putting in place a robust system for securing expert advice. If the NFL can do that, it will have taught a valuable lesson with application far beyond the gridiron.

*Mr. Pielke is a professor at the University of Colorado-Boulder, where he is overseeing a new initiative in sports governance.*