

An Assessment of Student Athlete Perspectives on Mandate for Sickle Cell Trait Screening

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Over the last decade there have been approximately ten (10) athlete fatalities linked to complications of the sickle cell trait, and several lawsuits have been filed against the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) by the families of the deceased athletes. Studies have shown that the risk of exercise related sudden death is 10-30 times higher among sickle cell carriers than its non-carriers, but the overall incidence is low. Based on the number of deaths over the last decade, only 1 in 200,000 athletes have died as a result of complications of the trait.

Nonetheless, the NCAA has issued a mandate that requires all Division I athletes to undergo a Sickle Cell Solubility test as part of routine medical examinations for athletic participation. The mandate for sickle cell trait screening has aroused considerable controversy. The National Athletic Trainer's Association (NATA) and College of American Pathologists (CAP) support sickle cell trait screening and argue that athletes should know their status since it could save their lives. On the other hand, it is quite possible that these programs will be discriminatory and unlikely to improve health. In his book "Drawing Blood," Keith Wailoo recounts a time in American history when blacks were stigmatized and believed to be genetically inferior to whites because of sickle cell disease. The incidence of Sickle cell trait is such that 2 million Americans, or 1 in 12 African Americans, carry the sickle cell trait. There is, therefore, major concern about genetic screening leading to racial discrimination and segregation of African-American athletes with a positive sickle cell trait status. The Sickle Cell Anemia Association of America has publicly objected to mandatory screening for this reason.

To date, there have been several opinions on the screening test and the implications it may have on scholarship offers, privacy, player participation and involvement as well as the consequences of the test on the athlete's self-image and future employability in professional sports. All NCAA Division I athletes will be faced with the decision to take the test or opt out of testing, so it will be very interesting to get their insight on the issue. Many of these athletes may oppose the mandate for Sickle Cell trait testing because of a lack of knowledge of the condition, or more importantly, for fear of being singled out.

The research project will explore the perceptions of NCAA Division I athletes on the mandate for Sickle cell trait testing, and responses will be solicited by distribution of an online survey through social networking.