

# Ask the expert: Integrated total health for the student-athlete

November 14, 2014 2:42pm

By: **Emily Kroshus, ScD, MPH**, Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, Harvard School of Public Health & NCAA Sport Science Institute

Caring for the health of student-athletes means caring for both their mental and physical health: the two are often inseparable with one often impacting the other. In this month's segment of Ask the Expert, leading psychiatrist Dr. Eliot Sorel describes the importance of providing integrated health care for student-athletes where physical and mental health are jointly addressed.

**Q: As a psychiatrist with a background as a soccer player and coach, what has been your experience providing care to collegiate athletes?**

I think of myself as a physician first and a psychiatrist second. As such, I always consider the total health of college athletes and work closely with other colleagues involved in the care of college athletes; mindful of the pressure student-athletes experience to return to practice as soon as possible and continue performing well academically. Coaches, athletic trainers and the integrated health teams, together, must put injury prevention, health protection, health promotion, illness prevention, healing of the total student-athlete and maintaining total health as their top priorities.

**Q: How do you see psychiatric care fitting with the care provided to student-athletes in the athletic training room?**

We need fresh, new thinking and new models of college health, creating a total health package for the college student-athlete. Such a model integrates physical and psychological health/medicine into a comprehensive evaluation prior to the sports season. It also implies having integrated, multidisciplinary health teams rather than specialty silos. The human body is the best example of an integrated, systemic whole. Brain, mind and body are one. Physical injuries affect psychological well-being. Psychological, invisible wounds affect the body's functioning and both affect sports performance, academic and work performance.

*To learn more about what athletics departments can do now, read “[Best practices for athletics departments](#)” by Chris Klenck, team physician at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.*

**Q: What do you see as the main barriers to appropriately integrating psychiatric care with sports medicine care in the collegiate setting?**

We must innovate by starting pilot projects that integrate physical and psychological medicine and refine them prior to making them mandatory. Scientific evidence developed by the Cochrane Collaborative in the UK now exists regarding the merits of primary prevention as well as of collaborative, integrated care.

*To learn more about the “speed bumps” that athletic trainers and others often encounter in caring for the mental health of student-athletes, read “[Solving the Mental Health Puzzle](#)” by University of South Carolina Athletic Trainer Rachel Sharpe in “Mind, Body, Sport”*

**Q: If you could tell athletic trainers and team physicians one thing about psychiatric care for student-athlete mental health issues, what would it be?**

I would rather tell them that total, integrated evaluations and care must be one of the fundamental cornerstones of college athletics. An integrated healthcare approach is essential for student-athlete well-being and enhanced performance.

*With proper instruction and screening tools, athletics department staff can play an important role in early identification of student-athlete’s total health needs and will be able to effectively connect at-risk student-athletes with the treatment resources they need. To learn more about early identification for at-risk student-athletes, [click here](#).*

## **About Eliot Sorel, MD**

Eliot Sorel, M.D., D.L.F.A.P.A., is an internationally recognized global health leader, educator, health systems policy expert and practicing physician. Dr. Sorel co-chairs the National Council on Youth Sports Safety, and is a member of the Council on Healthcare Systems and Finance of the American Psychiatric Association. He has professorial appointments in Global Health, Health Services Management and Leadership in the School of Public Health as well as in Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences in the School of Medicine at George Washington University. He is a Life Member of the American Medical Association, a Fellow of the American College of Psychiatrists, and a Distinguished Life

Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association. He did his psychiatric training at Yale University, obtained his B.A. from New York University, and M.D. from the State University of New York. He has developed and led health systems in North America and the Caribbean, has consulted and taught in more than twenty countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas. Dr. Sorel is the author of more than sixty scientific papers and book chapters and the editor of seven books