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## NFL players face unhealthy system when it comes to treating injuries

By [Sally Jenkins](#)

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While NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell is considering whether to suspend players for seeking cures from the syringe-wielding physician Anthony Galea, he should ask why so many of them distrust their team physicians and seek alternative ways to heal. Medical care in the league is not a simple issue. Anyone who says otherwise should read up on O.J. McDuffie's case.



Two weeks ago former Miami Dolphins wide receiver McDuffie was awarded \$11.5 million by a jury because his team physician turned a toe injury into a career-ender. Let's be honest: NFL players suffer extremes of pain, and it's considered perfectly okay for league doctors to mask it. Yet Santana Moss faces a penalty for seeking an injection that was not numbing but potentially restorative to the bum knee he has been playing on for three years. What sense does that make?

McDuffie describes the NFL ethic: "You're supposed to play hurt, but you're not supposed to play injured." It's a small but vital distinction and players rely on team doctors to tell them the difference. Everyone in the league is in some kind of pain -- they have joint problems, microtears, they need medication, or some other kind of pain management -- and the trick is to keep it from becoming catastrophic. While there are no doubt many ethical and excellent doctors, the system is rife with conflicts and unnatural pressures. First of all, the doctors are hired and paid for by management. It's compromised medicine -- and an NFLPA survey of 1,152 players a few years ago reflected a trust gap between many players and their doctors. On one team only 19 percent felt they received trustworthy care.

ESPN analyst and former Washington Redskin and Denver Bronco Mark Schlereth underwent 29 surgeries. He says, "For the most part I had competent doctors, but I ultimately knew who paid their bills. I was under no illusion who they really worked for."

The title of team physician is a coveted one that can help an orthopedic surgeon triple his business. Some orthopedists even pay teams to hire them for the publicity value.

"The job of team doctor job is an entrée to a life of fame and fortune, and it creates a conflict of interest," says one of McDuffie's attorneys, **Stuart Ratzan**. "Is he going to

please the team and the coach? Or is he going to fulfill his Hippocratic oath to the player-patient?"

Jeff Novak of the Jacksonville Jaguars watched a shin bruise become a stinking, suppurating wound infected with staph and E. coli while under the care of the Jags' team physician. Novak says he's never quite recovered full strength in the leg. He sued the doctor and won, but the decision was overturned by a judge.

Pierce Scranton, a former Seattle Seahawks doctor and former president of the NFL Physicians Society, once told ESPN: "Medicine in the NFL is different than medicine in the real world. A patient who falls and hurts his hip probably would be out of work for three months with a hip pointer. In the NFL, that player would be back on the field the next week."

Is it any wonder that Raiders wide receiver Javon Walker had surgery without the team's knowledge? Or that Brandon Marshall concealed a hip injury? Or that several NFL players went to a Canadian doctor with a witch-doctor's reputation for healing knees and shoulders?

McDuffie says, "You can't take time off in the NFL, and the doctors feel that pressure too."

In the first half of a game against the New England Patriots on Nov. 21, 1999, McDuffie hyperextended his big toe in a collision near the goal line. He felt a pop inside the joint, and came limping out of the game. He was examined on the sideline, taped up, and sent back in. On the very next play, he felt another pop. This time the team doctor, John Uribe, took him into the locker room, and numbed his foot with an injection. Again he was retaped, and sent back into the game.

The next day, McDuffie had two MRI exams. They showed evidence that he had completely ruptured the ligaments in his toe. Yet Uribe called the images "not significant." He encouraged McDuffie to continue to practice and play, assured him that he would "heal without incident" and have a "complete recovery." For the rest of the season, Uribe numbed McDuffie's toe with injections before every game. His foot became so swollen that he had to wear two different sizes of shoes. He wore a size 11 1/2 on his healthy foot, and a size 13 on the injured one.

At the end of the season, Coach Jimmy Johnson resigned, and Uribe lost his job. The new physician, Dan Kanell, took one look at the MRIs and ordered McDuffie to a specialist. The specialist diagnosed the rupture, but by then it was too late. McDuffie had suffered irreversible joint damage. His specialist told him his long-term options were a joint replacement, or, if the pain got bad enough, he could consider severing the nerves.

McDuffie first sued Uribe for negligence and malpractice in 2002 and finally won May 6. He hasn't been paid yet, and the case will probably be appealed. In the meantime, he's becoming an advocate for medical reform in the NFL. He and his attorneys, Ratzan,

along with Herman Russomanno and Robert Borello, are working on a program to educate players about joint damage, and they urge every player in the NFL to seek independent second opinions -- from specialists.

Under league rules teams aren't obliged to provide second opinions. They have to pay for one if a player demands it, but most players don't, because they feel pressured not to. "Ultimately if you aren't a star in this league, and you go outside the team to another physician, you become somewhat of a pariah," Schlereth says.

As McDuffie points out, most players don't know they need a second opinion when the team doctor tells them they're fine.

"You only think about a second opinion when you get bad news," McDuffie says. "When you get good news, you stop there. I got good news -- it was the best news I'd heard. I was excited. I could walk back on the field and do my job, and earn my living."

Only, he wasn't fine.

"This was a conscientious, intelligent player who was asking all the right questions, and he was given the wrong answers," Ratzan says.

There is a difference in the scenario McDuffie was in, and the one Moss finds himself in. Moss apparently went outside the system and asked the wrong person the wrong questions and got the wrong kind of help. But personally, I don't have the stomach to blame him, given the flawed medical system he operates in, and I hope Goodell doesn't either.

Players deserve to explore a range of remedies to address their unreasonable stresses. And they should be far more empowered in voicing what they need, and in designing and implementing their system of care. Rather than suspend, Goodell should reform.