Police Commissioner

(Police Precinct. )

(Any Town, )

USA

( DATE )

CTE and Law Enforcement

The invisible epidemic you may see every day

We can only imagine what officers face every day during their interactions with unruly citizens. Better yet…we can’t imagine. Every time we hear the term MENTAL HEALTH in the context of crime, we cringe. We cringe because we know it’s real. We don’t have to imagine this part because we lived it. We lost a son who took his own life. We lost him to CTE Chronic traumatic encephalopathy. His name is Patrick, and during the last years of his life he gradually went off the rails. His brain was unwiring. We were baffled by his unexplainable actions, and feared he might hurt someone. Thankfully that didn’t happen. He chose to end his life on his own. No mass shooting, no “death by cop”, no public catastrophe. Unfortunately these are options other sufferers have chosen. Thank goodness he didn’t choose the path of violence, he could have. When he passed, the officer on the scene asked us if he had been depressed. Back then not much was known about CTE in our little town. A month before he died we heard about CTE. By then it was way too late, and yes he was depressed, tired, confused, scared, angry and suicidal. He felt everyone and everything had let him down. Our Dartmouth Grad was at his wits end and he didn’t know why. He couldn’t stay another day.

CTE is Chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a progressive incurable brain disease you may have heard about in the context of football, boxing, and other high impact activities like military service, rodeo, hockey, and the list goes on and on. You’ve heard of it usually in reference to professional athletes. But amateur athletes as young as 17 get CTE too. Patrick played college football. We believe this insidious brain disease turns ordinary individuals into unruly citizens, many of whom you in law enforcement may be encountering on a daily basis. For reasons we have yet to understand our mental health community is tragically slow to recognize this epidemic hidden in plain sight. Symptoms of CTE include depression, anxiety, explosive anger, paranoia, confusion, impulse control issues, substance abuse, loss of empathy, slurred speech, impaired judgement, and the list goes on.

 The stories we hear from families of CTE sufferers are all so similar. Most of these young individuals were fine upstanding citizens, everyones best friend, loaded with potential, hometown heroes before the symptoms began. But as the CTE disease progresses in the brain, the person changes.

So here’s a question. When you are confronted with a bad actor, what difference does it make how he or she got to this bad place? Isn’t a bad actor just a bad actor that must be dealt with in real time?

Most of us can’t imagine standing in your shoes at that critical moment. You have to assess the situation, remember the rules, and use your best judgement to control or mitigate the situation, and quite often you must do all of this in a split second. This is tough under the best of circumstances. We would offer that if you had a bit more insight into how they got their crazy, you might be better prepared to deal with it.

Here’s the thing. We have no idea how many of our criminals have CTE because we aren’t looking for it. There are a few studies being done but certainly not enough. The “big story” on action news seldom if ever reveals the background of the suspect beyond criminal history unless of course he’s OJ Simpson, or Junior Seau, or Aaron Hernandez. The first thing we look for when we see the horror is the suspects name, we google it, and bingo! Eight out of ten times the guy played football, was a boxer, munitions expert, rugby, or a motocross champ. In other words he suffered repetitive blows to the head (with or without a helmet, doesn’t matter) during his early life. CTE takes time to develop symptoms. It can take several years, but it can also take decades. We just don’t connect the dots. That separation between the cause and the symptoms makes this disease all the more difficult to see. Meanwhile you’re dealing with the symptoms while the root cause is largely unknown. We must start connecting the dots. They are quite visible if only we choose to look for them.

In August of this year another important piece of mental health legislation was signed. The TBI and PTSD Law Enforcement Training Act authorizes $270 million over five years to reauthorize the Justice and Mental Health Collaboration Program (JMHCP) and fund a new police training program to help law enforcement and first responders better recognize and respond to people suffering from traumatic brain injury and post traumatic stress disorder. If properly implemented, this will be a positive thing. And this is good. However for us, there is a third piece missing called CTE. You see, TBI is an injury, PTSD is a psychological condition, and CTE is a disease. It is a progressive and degenerative and incurable disease that destroys its host. This disease needs to be addressed. It’s time, and law enforcement must be kept in the loop.

It is human nature to rush to solution before fully understanding the problem. We all do it from time to time. Certainly the best way to address the problem is first to fully understand it. Tremendous progress is being made through research about the cause and prevalence of this disease. So far CTE can only be diagnosed post mortem. To date there is no cure. Sufferers need care, not correction. But if we cannot understand the CTE sufferer, like we didn’t understand Patrick’s behavior when he was alive, chances are we’re going to do the wrong thing. We did the wrong thing. We didn’t know then what is so blatantly obvious to us now. Otherwise we would have acted very differently.

Each time law enforcement encounters a suicide, takes down a school shooter, an enraged abuser, a threatening opponent, they should order a brain autopsy for CTE. These autopsies are free from the CTE Brain Bank. Chances are the results will be sobering. We have a very real problem here, and we can learn a lot through a specialized autopsy.

Hopefully with a greater understanding of CTE we can be in a better position to manage encounters with those who are suffering and maybe save lives in the process.

We can only hope this piece raises your awareness of CTE a bit. If we can help in any way, please reach out to us. You can only imagine what this means to us.

Thank You.

( NAME(S) )

( INFO )

For more information please visit [stopCTE.org](http://stopCTE.org)