Should Mixed Martial Arts Events Be Legal in the United States?

A huge fan of Mixed Martial Arts, **Dr. Jacob Berdell** is a 44 year old board certified medical professional with degrees in biophysics and medicine. He has no children, though he has a dog named Todd, and when away from his medical work, spends most of his time with his girlfriend of 2 years. Berdell has post-graduate experience dealing with head injuries and system trauma, and writes a monthly article titled Fistic Medicine for a popular Mixed Martial Arts news website. In these articles, he compiles questions he has received from MMA fans via email and answers them with his medical knowledge. In addition to studying Mixed Martial Arts himself, Berdell also enjoys watching documentaries shown on the History Channel, and has his own private collection of documentary DVD’s that History Channel has released over the years.

Having worked as a medical professional in foreign countries affected by armed conflict for over 10 years, **Dr. Terrence Wingham** has certainly experienced and treated his share of violence. At 67 years old, he is now retired, and writes articles for medical journals and is a member of a state medical advisory board in New York. He is a widower, and enjoys spending his free time with his grandson and family upstate, where fishing and hiking number among his favorite activities. He enjoys watching older television programs, such as *Twilight Zone* and *I love Lucy*, though his
favorite show is *Law and Order: SVU*. He has debated the topic of MMA legalization several times in his advisory board meetings, and does not find it to be a particularly attractive sport.

*July 17th 2010. Dr. Jacob Berdell has just finished writing his monthly article for Sherdog.com-a popular MMA news website—from his laptop at an internet cafe in Syracuse, New York. Sitting next to him in this internet cafe is Dr. Terrence Wingham, who is reading emails his family has sent him on one of the cafe’s desktops. The television in the shop is playing a sports news and analysis show, which begins to broadcast the results and highlights of the UFC card broadcast on pay-per-view the night before.*

Wingham: (looking up, with a sigh) Some of the things people watch these days. I tell you what.

Berdell: (attempting to start conversation) It was quite a good fight card, I thought. It was interesting to see how their lightweight champion handled the takedowns of a larger wrestler. He really showed his chops.

Wingham: (grinning) I take it you’re a fan of this… sport?

Berdell: Certainly am. If it weren’t for having completed medical school I would probably be trying out the circuit myself.

Wingham: (turning in his seat) Ahhhhh a fellow medical professional! I myself am a student of medicine! (a short pause) Though, if you don't mind my asking, why would you put yourself in the way of so much harm simply for the sake of combat? Surely as a doctor you understand the dangers that this “sport” causes to your health?

Berdell: Quite well, actually. I have post graduate training in head injuries and system trauma, so… I guess you could say, ironically enough, that I understand it better than most.
Wingham: I’m intrigued! So I’m sure you’ve heard the study done that suggests a strong link between chronic health conditions and those who engage in combat sports? (Focht 1)

Berdell: Certainly. There are many studies that show the link between them, but there are also huge differences between Mixed Martial Arts and other combat sports.

Wingham: Such as?

Berdell: Well, it’s much different from boxing, for example. And boxing is widely accepted and mainstream.

Wingham: I would like to hear: what differences do you say there are?

Berdell: Doctors have noted that damage can be exponentially increased with repeated blows to the head that hold any amount of power (Ngai). This is exacerbated in sports such as boxing, where even if a boxer was knocked out on his feet, if he is able to tell the referee he is okay then the head blows continue. And the padded gloves don't help, as once the athlete is wobbled; the damage to his brain can only be increased with any repeated blows. In MMA the fight is stopped at this point instead of continued.

Wingham: But how can you say Mixed Martial Arts causes less damage to a fighter than boxing? In any given match a fighter can suffer multiple broken bones, dangerous cuts and then still be knocked out. These injuries can be further experienced in training, as well, which is nearly as rough as the combat itself. And as the fighter ages, these injuries can return to haunt them in the form of recurring small fracture breaks in their bones (Sims 265).

Berdell: Well, MMA fighters certainly can take more damage per fight, but any maladies they have are examined by doctors mid-fight to rule if they can continue or not. Also, when MMA
fighters are knocked out, or even heavily wobbled, the fight is often stopped entirely, ceasing the
continuing brain damage that boxers may suffer in their sport. Further, in some cases the fighter
is not allowed to fight or train again for up to 180 days depending on the severity of the damage
they accrue in a match (Pitt 1). Hard training is off the board in this case as well, so their injuries
are not further enflamed.

Wingham: Even still, many MMA fighters suffer knockouts and broken bones in training. And
even when not knocked out, any blow to the head is known as a minor traumatic brain injury, or
MTBI, and fighters can suffer many thousands of these throughout their career. This, coupled
with the amount of time they practice each week could lead to serious traumatic brain scarring as
the fighters age, correct? I’m certain that studies have shown combat and contact sports athletes
that experience many MTBI’s, including football, have a universally higher rate of Chronic
Traumatic Encephalopathy than regular sports (Buse 169).

Berdell: This is true, but MMA is still young, and there really hasn’t been enough time for the
full effects of CTE to show up on any MMA fighters alive today. Ironically enough, I believe the
only brain belonging to an MMA fighter that has been examined for brain scar tissue came up
largely negative for severe brain damage. This compared with the obvious beginning signs
present during an examination of the brain of a football player who was only 18 (Pitt 1).

Wingham: But one brain? That cannot be conclusive. And beside the fact is that the fighter
examined hadn’t had as many professional fights, nor experienced as many MTBI’S as some of
the MMA stars of today.

Berdell: You’re right, it’s certainly not conclusive. But I do believe it shows that MMA can be
practiced without causing severe long-term effects or brain damage.
Wingham: Well what about debilitating injuries, such as spinal damage and appendages being rendered useless? While I’ve seen only a few MMA matches myself, I imagine this is quite common, especially in smaller, less regulated promotions that are not well known enough to be held under public scrutiny for referee or medical mistakes. In fact just last week I saw a match that was poorly refereed and the downed fighter received multiple unanswered blows that were completely unnecessary.

Berdell: In fact, it is uncommon. There have only been 3 recorded deaths resulting from taking part in an MMA-based activity in any promotion, though you are correct, two were due to poor medical handling on the part of smaller promotion companies (Buse 170). This is far less than boxing, however, and there have been few enough permanently debilitating injuries that the sport is currently sanctioned by the athletic commissions of every state except for this one: New York.

Wingham: (thinks for a moment) It certainly appears you’ve done your research. One last thing, however, which is slightly outside the medicine realm of science; how can you explain the studies that have shown an increase in aggression and violence among adolescents that watch combat sports on a regular basis (“Teen”)? Do you not find this trend troubling?

Berdell: I do.

Wingham: Then please, explain.

Berdell: While MMA has come a long way from the literal no-holds-barred fighting of the early 90’s (which I do not regret to see leave us), I agree that it still has room for improvement in its depiction of violence.
Wingham: I find the advertising in particular to glorify violence, and it makes the ad difficult to watch.

Berdell: Actually, I agree. By showing highlight reel advertisements glorifying knockouts and spectacle, it can encourage children to think of this as the goal of MMA. This is, however, not the case. By only including the striking aspect of MMA, advertisers do the sport the unfortunate disservice of leaving out the grappling aspect of the sport entirely. This comprises over half of the technique, and though it is more boring to watch, it is what allows MMA to transform itself from a form of glorified barenuckle boxing into something more appropriate. Unfortunately, it is like that for all combat sports: children should perhaps simply not be exposed to them until they are old enough to understand its complex implications.

Wingham: (Thinks for several moments, but is interrupted when his phone rings) Oh dear. Sorry to cut this fascinating conversation short, but I’ve got to take this call. You understand.

Berdell: Certainly, you’ve given me a lot to think about!

Wingham: Hopefully we’ll meet again to revive this debate.

Berdell: I look forward to it.
Works Cited


