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Press Release

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In 2009 the NCAA announced to its member organizations a decision to recommend that all collegiate athletes confirm their sickle cell trait status. Although the Sickle Cell Disease Association of America does not support collegiate athlete screening in its present form, we are sensitive to the impetus behind the NCAA's recommendation and overwhelmingly support, in principal, efforts to educate all individuals about their hemoglobinopathy status. Since the NCAA's announcement, SCDAA's member organizations have received numerous inquiries from individuals, families and coaches wanting to know the who, what, when where and how on screening athletes for sickle cell trait. To effectively address our member organizations and provide thoughtful guidance on the public health implications of sickle cell trait, and guide the development of an effective outreach and education program, the Medical and Research Committee (MARAC) of SCDAA has convened a meeting in partnership with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the National, Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, National Institutes of Health (NHLBI/NIH), the Maternal and Child Health Bureau, Health Resources and Services Administration (MCHB/HRSA) and nationally recognized Key Opinion Leaders in a variety of disciplines including epidemiology, hematology, sports medicine, pathology, bioethics, public health, genetics and newborn

screening to discuss current scientific understanding, policies and programs in the United States and other countries on sickle cell trait. The meeting is scheduled to occur in December 2009. The goals for the meeting are:

1. Draft an agenda that may serve as the impetus to study and apply changes in athletic training and conditioning similar to those made by the military in the U.S., Israel, and elsewhere, to make basic training for recruits safer and less likely to cause deaths due to exertional heat illness;
2. Draft an agenda that will serve as the impetus for college athletics to work with the National Institutes of Health, the Centers for Disease Control, the Health Resources and Services Administration, and the Sickle Cell Disease Association of America (SCDAA) to conduct research to find the causes, prevention measures, and treatment of exertional heat illness in athletes with SCT;
3. Draft an agenda that will serve as an impetus for the professional medical organizations to educate physicians evaluating students for participation in strenuous athletics to include counseling about the risks, including SCT, and prevention of exertional heat illness; and,
4. To understand the public health implications of sickle cell trait screening and provide recommendations to community organizations who offer hemoglobinopathy/sickle cell trait screening.

SCDAA continues to keep its finger on the pulse of this important issue.

We are closely monitoring the news regarding NFL Pittsburgh Steelers player Ryan Clark, who according to reports, has sickle trait. Two years ago, while playing in the high altitudes of Denver, Mr. Clark suffered life threatening medical complications reportedly related to sickle cell trait and the thin atmosphere of the city. We understand, that as of Sunday, November 8, 2009, the Pittsburgh Steelers had decided not to play Mr. Ryan Clark in tonight's game in Denver due to concerns regarding his health. Individuals with sickle cell trait can experience serious morbidity or mortality, although rare, under extreme circumstances. Exposure to increasing altitude hypoxia will progressively increase the extent of sickling in individuals with a sickle cell hemoglobinopathy. Blood can pool in the spleen thus leading to the need for the spleen to be surgically removed. Mr. Clark's spleen and gallbladder were both surgically removed after playing in Denver two years ago. We do not know the full details of Mr. Clark's hemoglobinopathy status or if other medical conditions contributed to the complications he experienced, however, we can confirm that there are well-documented case reports on the complications of sickle cell trait and altitude. Accordingly, the health and safety of athletes and all individuals with sickle cell trait is a primary focus of SCDA and the Key Opinion Leader meeting in December. Recommendations from the meeting will be made available to the public.