



Research Snapshot

The Role of Club Doctors in the Mental Health Management of Australian Rules Football Players: A Delphi Study

Weber, B., Bos, J., Clancy, E., Menon, R., Cross, T., & Hall, K (2021) The role of club doctors in the mental health management of Australian Rules Football Players: A Delphi Study. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 2021;0:1–7. doi:10.1136/bjsports-2021-104388

Research Snapshot

This research snapshot describes the findings of a recent research study which aimed to provide consensus among Australian Football League club doctors on how to best manage athlete mental health.

Why is this study needed?

Mental health problems are common. Professional athletes, just like the general community, can experience a range of mental health problems. These problems can be both sport- and non-sport related. Sport related challenges might include performance anxiety, social pressures, and stresses related to injuries. Non-sport related factors include challenging life events, age, and lack of social support. Despite how common mental health problems are, there is a gap in evidence in how to best manage athlete mental health. This study aimed to report on consensus among AFL club doctors on how to best manage athlete mental health. This study is important in terms of supporting sporting clubs to address the mental health needs of athletes.

What did they do?

The researchers who led this study looked at all the available evidence to date and created a list of statements of potential actions and roles of club doctors in how to best support athlete mental health.

Some examples statements were;

Club doctors should be aware of all whole of club prevention and promotion programs.

Each club has at least one nominated health professional with relevant expertise, who is responsible for mental health screening.

The club doctor holds duty of care for player's mental health.

Twenty-eight participants took part in the survey, all of whom were club doctors currently or previously working with professional men's and women's AFL teams. The participant identities remained anonymous. Participants were asked to rate the importance of the statements, on a scale including;

Essential, Important, Depends, Not Important, or Should Not Be Included.



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What did they find?

Nine themes emerged that were endorsed by the club doctors. They can be summarized as;

Prevention and Mental Health Promotion

Activities. Participants strongly endorsed that club doctors should be aware of and engaged in whole of club mental health promotion activities, which should be evidence-based and multidisciplinary.

Screening. There was consensus that valid, reliable, and standardized screening tools should be used to allow for early identification of mental health symptoms. Screening should be completed at specific timeframes in the athlete's career, as well as during critical life events.

Engaging External Specialists. Participants strongly endorsed that a qualified mental health professional should be engaged for assessment and management of any psychological issues, and that club doctors must be aware of and engaged in coordination of external mental health assessment.

Duty of Care. Participants strongly endorsed that club doctors held the duty of care for player mental health, but also that a nominated health professional could be embedded to manage treatment to ease the burden on club doctors.

Treatment. It was identified that club doctors would hold responsibility for treatment coordination and for referring to external mental health professionals. It was also recommended that concurrent referrals to mental health professional should be considered when the athlete experiences physical injury.

Communication. and it was agreed that it was not within the club doctor role to communicate with media, family or friends about athlete mental health, but that club doctors should be involved in decisions to notify media about players mental health disorder.

Confidentiality. Standard protocols were endorsed in relation to athlete confidentiality, including abiding by existing legal and ethical protocols.

Sleep Management. Participants endorsed that club doctors should have the ability to track sleep of athletes, and the club doctor should encourage sleep as a part of a healthy training protocol.

Substance Use Management. The participants endorsed that it is the club doctor's role to co-ordinate evidence-based treatment for alcohol use disorders, but that directly providing treatment for alcohol, gambling and substance use was beyond their responsibilities.

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What does this mean?

This study supports a whole club approach to optimise prevention, early identification and treatment to manage athlete mental health. This can be actioned through the following phases;



Prevent

- Club Doctors should be aware of, and engage with, whole of club mental health promotion activities.
- Such programs should be evidence-based, multidisciplinary and delivered by those with appropriate expertise.
- Mental health literacy training is essential and should be included in the AFL program to encourage help-seeking. This includes athletes, coaches, support staff and other personnel.



Identify

- Mental health screening tools should be used at specific times in the athletes career including; recruitment, pre-season, end of season, and end of contract or retirement, and during critical life events.
- There is emerging evidence of associations between concussion and mental health symptoms and this may result in the future need for further training for club doctors in this area.
- Screening of Mental health concerns can be undertaken by appropriately trained professionals with clinical expertise (e.g., Club Doctor, Club Psychologist).



Respond

- Club doctors hold responsibility for treatment coordination oversight and duty of care and a nominated suitably qualified mental health professional can be referred to deliver treatment of mental health conditions.
- An athlete may require referral to mental health professional when an athlete experiences a physical injury.
- It is outside the club doctor's role to communicate with media, friends of families about player's mental health. Club Doctors should be involved in decisions about whether to notify or not notify the media about a player's mental health disorder.



Recover

- The Club Doctor and other Health Care Staff (e.g. Psychologist and/or Player Development Manager) will lead the reintegration of the player to the club. They will provide guidance into the players return to training and competition.

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What do these findings mean overall?

This is the first study to report on consensus for the role of club doctors in managing mental health of athletes in professional Australian Rules Football. Most of the support for elite athlete mental health has focused on improving mental health awareness. This study highlights that a multi-disciplinary team and whole club approach is needed to successfully support player mental health. This study provides a starting point for club doctors to respond to the varied needs of elite athletes in the Australian Football Domain.

Where can I find further information?

[LINK TO PUBLISHED STUDY HERE](#)



