



3 July 2019

Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System
PO Box 12079
A'Beckett Street
VICTORIA 8006

Dear Commissioners

Please find attached our submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System.

The Australian Football League (AFL) Purpose is to 'progress the game so everyone can share in its heritage and possibilities'.

The AFL is committed to improving and evolving the game, ensuring it continues to be relevant now and into the future for the millions of people, many of which live in Victoria, who either participate in or engage with Australian Football.

The AFL employs more than 1000 people working across Australia and internationally, with a significant amount of our team based in Victoria. Our diverse group of people are at the heart of everything we do and live our values to ensure the AFL is a successful and high performing organisation.

Our footprint goes far beyond our directly employed staff. The wider AFL industry employs more than 4000 people and our game also has a significant volunteer base which supports Australian Football at all levels.

We have outlined the above to provide the context to which we make this submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System.

The AFL believes it has a role to play in support of the Royal Commission's purpose 'to make a sustained effort to reduce the stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness and promote more inclusive communities throughout Victoria'.

As a large employer and a high-profile organisation that engages with individuals and communities right across Victoria in many ways, the AFL can help educate and raise awareness of the prevalence and impact, causal factors and categories of mental illness that exist across the community.

It is important to note that the AFL is not a mental health organisation or service provider, but we do have a responsibility to help improve the mental health of all those involved in our game - players, coaches and umpires in our elite competitions, the participants and volunteers at community Australian Football clubs and our wider industry workforce across the AFL and AFL Clubs.

Australian Football League

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As a key partner of the Victorian Government with an important role in the Victorian community, we welcome the opportunity to provide this submission, which has the support of the AFL Players' Association (AFLPA), and we look forward to the Royal Commission's ability to help facilitate a wider community conversation about mental health.

Yours sincerely

Steve Hocking

GM Football Operations

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GM Inclusion and Social Policy

Introduction

The AFL is strongly supportive of the Victorian Government's Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System.

We provide this submission, not on the basis that we are mental health experts or service providers, but as a national sporting organisation with significant responsibilities from grass roots to the elite professional level of the game.

The AFL's interest and responsibility in mental health is multi-layered:

- **As an employer:** We represent a very diverse workforce of over 4000 people, from the staff organising grass roots participation to the coaches of the elite level.
- **As a national sporting organisation:** We have over 600 leagues consisting of thousands of community clubs, with a footprint in every state and territory.
- **As an elite competition:** Our 18 AFL Clubs and more than 800 professional sporting athletes have enormous public and social reach, many of our players and coaches are national role models, and the sporting and private lives of many of our players are subject to high levels of media scrutiny and public engagement.
- **As a significant social institution:** We understand the impact that sport has in the lives of a significant number of Australians. Sporting clubs are the life blood of many communities, and involvement in sport has a positive impact on the physical and mental health of individuals. The sense of belonging that the connection to a club or game delivers is unique, and involvement in sport provides invaluable social connections that benefits our society and nation. We believe our game plays an important role in reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We understand our capacity to be part of the wider conversation about mental health that leads to ending stigma and discrimination.

We have a responsibility to understand more about the impact mental health issues are having on our staff, players, clubs and the communities in which we operate.

The Royal Commission provides a significant opportunity to understand the broader impact of mental health on the people of Victoria.

Our submission is in two parts:

1. Role of Sport in Mental Health
2. AFL Mental Health Framework and Future Challenges

Role of Sport in Mental Health

The Victorian Government's Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health system is a once in a generation opportunity to focus the attention of our community on the issues of mental illness.

Mental illness impacts on people from all walks of life, and in every part of our state. The services set up to manage mental illness are overwhelmed by growing demands, and the impact on our health and community services is a significant issue.

The Commission has broad terms of reference, but the AFL is particularly interested in the focus areas of prevention and early intervention, and the need to lessen the stigma around mental illness.

There is a growing body of national and international research that tells us that mental disorders are a growing health challenge and one which contributes substantially to the global disease burden.¹

ABS statistics indicate that 26% of young Australians suffer from anxiety, affective or substance use disorders or other mental illnesses, whilst 45% of Australian adults will experience a mental illness at some stage of their lives.²

The research says that young people who suffer from mental disorders carry significant personal, social and economic costs that can last a lifetime.

Half of all mental disorders have their onset before the age of 14, and in Australia young men and boys represent the group at highest risk of mental disorders and suicide.³

In 2018, the Federal Government released its Sport 2030 report. The report outlined the positive impact of sport on individuals and the nation:

- In 2017, it was estimated that sport creates \$29 billion of net health benefits each year.
- Research consistently shows that sport provides children with life skills such as team work, fair play and resilience, and that children who play sport stay at school longer, achieve better academic results and have higher lifetime earnings.
- Being physically active through life and into older age has significant health benefits, and research has shown the impact of physical activity on physical and mental illnesses, like depression and anxiety.
- Community-based sporting clubs are a unique form of social capital which helps bind Australian communities – with people who play sport at the community level 44% more likely to have mixed-ethnic relationships.

¹ Siefkin K, Junge A, Laemmle. How does sport affect mental health? An investigation into the relationship of leisure-time physical activity with depression and anxiety. *Hum Mov.* 2019 (1): 62-74

² ABC SMHWB 2007

ABS Cause of Death Data 2015

³ Vella et al. "Ahead of the Game protocol: A multi-component, community sport-based program targeting prevention, promotion and early intervention for mental health amongst adolescent males": *BMC Public Health* (2018) 18:390

The Australian Sports Commission has long argued that the value of sport goes beyond the promotion of physical health, with research showing the links between sport and community cohesion, community pride, development of life skills, the prevention of crime, improved mood and self-esteem.⁴

More recently, academic research has shown the specific link between mental health and physical activity, and an even stronger link between mental health and team sport, and the capacity of sport to be part of building the community's mental health literacy.

From "Ahead of the Game protocol: A multi-component, community sport-based program targeting prevention, promotion and early intervention for mental health amongst adolescent males", the authors point out the impact of high-profile sportsmen dealing publicly with mental health issues:

*"Recent Australian research has shown that prominent sportsmen who have publicly disclosed their mental health issues had a positive impact on men's intentions to seek help and helped to further establish help seeking as a social norm".*⁵

Quoted in this paper are three key statistics:

- Participation in organised sports during adolescence is associated with a 10-20% reduction in risk for mental health problems when compared with those who drop out of sports.⁶
- Sports participation is associated with a 29% reduction in suicidal ideation.
- Sports participation leads to a 31% reduction in suicide attempts amongst adolescent males.⁷

Sport and physical activity also provides health and wellbeing outcomes for girls and women, and the barriers to participation for girls and women in sport has been the subject of considerable research and Government action.⁸

Over the past three to four years, there has been an increasing number of elite players who have spoken openly about their challenges with mental health issues. The courage of these individual players in speaking out has increased the profile of the issues within the industry, and created the space for better conversations, and an increased focus on the management of mental health across all levels of the game.

The AFL, the AFL Players' Association and the Clubs have increased their capacity to manage the impact of mental health issues on players, and the next section of this submission outlines the present framework and future challenges.

⁴ https://www.clearinghouseforsport.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/563748/ABS-Social_impacts_of_sport.pdf

⁵ Vella et al. BMC Public Health (2018) 18:390

⁶ Vella SA, Cliff DP, Magee CA, Okely AD. Associations between sports participation and psychological difficulties during childhood: a two year follow up. J Sci Med Sport 2015;18:304-9

⁷ Taliaferro LA, Eisenberg ME, Johnson KE, Nelson TF, Neumark-Sztainer D. Sport participation during adolescence and suicide ideation and attempts. Int J Adolesc Medicine Health. 2011; 23:3-10

⁸ https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/~media/ResourceCentre/PublicationsandResources/Physical%20activity/Female_participation_in_sport_Evidence_Aug15.pdf?la=en

AFL Mental Health Framework and Future Challenges

The AFL recognises that mental health is a critical issue facing the broader community and that our own playing group and Club football department staff have nominated mental health as the most important issue for our industry to address.

Over the past few years, the issue of mental health has been increasingly part of the AFL conversation:

- Current players reporting their own issues and receiving strong support from Clubs and fans to take time away from the game to manage those issues.
- Past players playing a very strong advocacy role in the media and in public debate.
- A number of Clubs partnering with organisations to raise the issues, most notably the relationship between Hawthorn and Beyond Blue.
- The AFL Players' Association (AFLPA) is committed to awareness raising campaigns, such as the 'Courageous Conversations' campaign in partnership with the Movember Foundation, numerous industry awareness and education programs and the provision of a bespoke mental health service for past and present players.
- Community football has been used as a site for many projects and programs in the mental health space. An example is the "Alive and Kicking Goals" program in the Kimberley region in North Western Australia which was aimed at reducing suicide amongst young Indigenous men and was run through the Broome Saints Football Club, and research showed a positive outcome.
- The establishment of the AFLW has added new challenges and responsibilities to the industry, with different needs and services for the new generation of female athletes in professional club environments.
- The importance of services to an increasingly diverse workforce and playing group, with the need to recognise specific barriers facing different communities, and risk factors associated with past trauma or present economic challenges.

The AFL industry has undertaken significant research and policy development steps since 2015:

- In 2015, the AFLPA and AFL commissioned Orygen, the National Centre of Excellence for Youth Mental Health, to report on the prevalence of mental health issues experienced by professional AFL players.
- The AFL developed a Mental Health Framework in 2015.
- The AFLPA has focused on supporting past and present players' mental health for a number of years through its National Psychology Network, campaigns and advocacy.
- In 2017, the AFLPA Player Survey identified mental health as the number one priority area of concern for players.
- In 2018, the AFL established the Industry Governance Committee, with a mandate which included examination of the management of mental health across the industry.
- The commissioning of the Mental Health Industry Review, conducted by Dr Daisy Brooke, sponsored by the AFL and the AFLPA, delivered in 2018-19.

We are also conscious of the changing demographic of people engaging in our game and we are preparing to ensure we consider specific cohort needs of the AFLW. Additionally, our game has had a long history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation and we acknowledge the work that we need to do to ensure the needs of this cohort are met, particularly given the specific issues that exist for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander players transitioning out of our game.

The AFL's Industry Governance Committee is currently considering all 29 industry recommendations arising from the Mental Health Industry Review, however the recommendation to appoint a Head of Mental Health at the AFL is in the final stages of fulfilment.

The key areas of importance for the AFL reflected in the 2015 Mental Health Framework and the review currently being considered by the Industry Governance Committee include:

- That while organised sport at the community level is proven to be a factor for preventing mental disorders, the promotion of mental health and the building of individual and community resilience, sport at the elite level does come with inherent stressors. These include the age profile of players, masculine stereotyping, job insecurity, injury, re-location, media and public scrutiny and short career spans.
- That the mental health of all staff in the AFL is critical to the environment in which the players operate, including coaching, football management, umpiring and support staff.
- That the industry recognises the access needs of a diverse playing group and workforce, with a particular emphasis on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other groups from disadvantaged, displaced or traumatic backgrounds.
- That the AFL is committed to the delivery of best practice care across the industry, with continuous improvement, data and evidence driven practices, and lead by the suitably qualified and accredited psychiatrists and psychologists.

The review by Dr. Daisy Brooke found high levels of commitment from all levels of the industry to implement a more strategic approach to mental health, with recommendations for focus on the following areas going forward:

Governance, Policy, and Planning

- Under the new Head of Mental Health and supported by an industry operations model, implement an AFL wide approach to mental health, including strategy, implementation, oversight of clinical operations and review of all mental health policies, processes and activities within the AFL, it's state entities and the wider AFL industry.
- Ensure best practice delivery of mental health & wellbeing programs to current and past male & female players, more than 4000 industry staff, the talent pathway and umpires.

Capacity Building

- Invest in improving the skills and experience across the industry, including increased presence of vocationally trained psychologists or psychiatrists at Club level, but also improving the mental health literacy and capacity of staff in critical positions in Clubs and State bodies.

Programs / Service Delivery

- Ensure best practice in the delivery of programs and services to ensure improvements in prevention, early intervention, and treatment.

Awareness Campaigns and Community Engagement

- Commit to long-term, strategic and evaluated awareness raising campaigns that support the positive messages for help seeking behaviour in the AFL industry, and in the broader community.
- Continue to use AFL platforms to increase public awareness and understanding of mental health.

Evaluation and Measurement

- Increase the capacity across the industry to measure our programs and approaches.
- Invest in longer term research to better understand the mental health and wellbeing service needs of past players.
- Partner with, and participate in, academic and industry research to enhance understanding of our mental health challenges and improve programs.

Conclusion and Broad Recommendations

Sport has an integral role to play in the mental health of our communities and the AFL has a responsibility to help improve the mental health of all those involved in our game. From grass roots to the elite professional level, we need to understand more about the impact mental health issues are having on our staff, players, clubs and the communities in which we operate.

We reiterate the AFL is not a mental health organisation or service provider, but we offer the following broad recommendations:

1. That organised sport and community sport continue to be recognised as a driver of better mental health outcomes for individuals and communities.
2. The development of deeper partnerships between sport, Government and mental health organisations be encouraged.
3. That further collaboration between Government, researchers and sporting organisations be encouraged to provide long term research regarding the mental health benefits of involvement in sport for all ages and populations.
4. That the role of community sporting clubs in providing social connection, harmony and community benefit be further researched and supported.