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Mental health and rugby football league: is enough being done to support players?

### Original Citation

Lewis, Kiara, Rodriguez, Alison, Kola, Susanna and Sherretts, Nicole (2016) Mental health and rugby football league: is enough being done to support players? *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 34 (sup1). i-s85. ISSN 0264-0414

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Common mental disorder (CMD) have a high prevalence in retired rugby players (Gouttebauge, Kerkhoffs and Lambert, 2015, *European College of Sports Science*, doi.org/10.1080/17461391:2015.1086819). The physical, psychosocial and organisational stressors Rugby Football League (RFL) players experience may all contribute to inducing symptoms of CMD. The aim of this study was to assess RFL players' perceived level of welfare support and to explore the experiences of Player Welfare Officers (PWO) attached to RFL's Super League. This two year, mixed-methods project, commissioned by the RFL Player Welfare Director was undertaken with institutional ethics approval. The quantitative phase utilised an anonymised internet based survey to assess players' perceptions of welfare support and aspects of mental health. Independent *t*-test results from the first survey ( $n=75$ ) indicate a significantly higher risk of depression with higher stress levels ( $t(73) = 5.88 p<0.001$ ) and with higher athletic identity ( $t(73) = 2.00 p<0.4$ ). Players at low risk of depression reported more positive attitudes towards welfare policy ( $t(74) = 2.26 p<0.2$ ). Better mental health was found when the club had a PWO, if they knew who the PWO was and if they knew how to access counselling services (second year survey results to follow,  $n=196$ ). The qualitative phase utilised semi-structured interviews and were analysed using Template Analysis (Brooks, McCluskey, Turley and King, 2015, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 12(2), 202-22). In the first year 11 PWOs were interviewed, 12 in the second year. PWOs perceived the services they provided to be a potentially valuable asset for players. The uptake depended on the level of support from the club. The attitude of the coaching staff determined whether players were given time to access the PWO and whether or not this was seen as a valuable use of their time: "the PWO is only as important as the club want it to be...you need the backing of the coach in certain situations and you need time to build that relationship". The PWOs have seen a cultural shift over the last year towards their role, and the services they signpost on to, being seen as more acceptable. The results suggest that the PWO's role is integral to supporting RFL players' mental health. This requires a full-time, not part-time role, and central funding from the RFL. This change would be advantageous in both increasing the time PWOs have available to support players, and the recognition of the value of the service they provide.