

# A sporting life

Dr Laura Lallenec is living a life tending to the medical needs of some of the country's best professional athletes ...

**L**AURA Lallenec has the dream job for a sports fan and former athlete – she is one of the club doctors for AFL side, the Melbourne Demons, and also runs the medical program for the Demons' AFLW side, and the Casey Demons VFL club.

And because Australian rules football isn't the be and all, she is also a club doctor for the Melbourne Storm NRL team.

She did take a break from football recently, however, just long enough to be one of the venue doctors for the Commonwealth Games netball competition.

"Sitting watching the netball I did realise how lucky I am," Dr Lallenec tells the *MJA*.

Dr Lallenec earned a BSc majoring in genetics from the Australian National University before going into public health policy in the field of sexual health with the ACT government. While there she decided to switch to a medical degree, and after completing the GAMSAT, she was offered a spot at Notre Dame University in WA.

"I did a year in Broome at the rural clinical school there in my third year and got intrigued with Indigenous health and tropical medicine, so I did my internship in Darwin, which I loved."

An orthopaedic rotation helped her realise that sport and exercise medicine was probably the best fit for her, and with Melbourne being the major hub for the discipline, she made the move south.

Two years of residency at Western Health followed, and it was then that she first volunteered to be a team doctor – with Spotswood – before the Williamstown VFL club offered her a paid job as their club doctor.

"I had a fantastic couple of years there," Dr Lallenec says. "Then the Melbourne Demons approached me to head up their AFLW

program. Now I do that as well as sharing duties with the men's team, and their VFL club."

It is a life not without its tests, however.

"Medically, the most challenging thing so far has been a mid-shaft tibia/fibula break on a 17-year-old kid that was displaced that I had to relocate on the field, with very limited support. But that's the kind of thing we're trained and ready for," Dr Lallenec says.

"To be honest, the most challenging in general are the concussion diagnoses.

"I was working with the AFL Academy kids. Every game is so important for them to be considered for the Draft Combine. I remember ruling a young guy out and being abused by his parents on the sideline and being accused of ruining his career."

*"You're making high level decisions under extreme pressure on game day"*

Concussion remains the medical issue that players and clubs still struggle with, she says.

"The AFL men certainly have great trust that you're making the decision that's best for the team as well as for their injury.

"These days they're very switched on to the processes of rehabilitation. [But] concussion is the only tricky one.

"The players don't place as much importance on it as they might do a hamstring tear, for example. They [sometimes] don't understand why they might do more damage if they continue to train or play with a concussion. There's still a lot of education and growth we can do in that area, but it is getting better.



Dr Laura Lallenec (left) and physiotherapist Kathleen Sakadjian help injured Demons AFLW player Karen Paxman off the field. Photo: AFL Media

"They can see it among themselves, especially with some players with repeated concussions where they see the repercussions of that, when people take a bit longer to get back playing.

"The AFL has worked really hard to make sure this is taken seriously."

Is there pressure on club doctors?

"It's a high pressure environment," Dr Lallenec says. "You're making high level decisions under extreme pressure on game day. And there are lots of layers of pressure. In a hospital environment you're accountable to your supervisor, but [being a club doctor] is a unique medical environment. There are lots of people you're accountable to."

Now in the third year of her 4-year advanced training program with the Australasian College of Sport and Exercise Physicians, Dr Lallenec is looking forward to more of the sporting life.

"I can imagine that I'll be doing this for a long time. I very much enjoy the challenge of working in different environments, the challenge of multiple workplaces. It's a great life."

**Cate Swannell**

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