

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into services for people with autism spectrum disorder

Melbourne — 6 March 2017

Members

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Witnesses

Professor Nicole Rinehart,

Associate Professor David Austin, Deakin Child Study Centre; and

Mr Logan Whitaker, inclusion (all abilities) manager, AFL.

The CHAIR — I welcome to these public hearings Professor Nicole Rinehart, director, Associate Professor David Austin from Deakin Child Study Centre, and Mr Logan Whitaker, inclusion — all abilities — manager, AFL. Thank you very much for attending today.

All evidence at this hearing taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and is subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003 and other relevant legislation. Any comments you make outside the hearing will not be afforded such privilege. It is a contempt of Parliament to provide false evidence. Recording of the proceedings will commence today, and you will be sent a proof copy of the transcript and be able to make factual or grammatical corrections if necessary. I invite you now to make a presentation to the committee. Thank you very much.

Prof. RINEHART — Thank you for having us. Today I am presenting on the ALLPlay program. It is a research program. It is very new, so we will not be able to provide a lot of detail on it. But we would like to provide information that starts our journey, and I understand you have a one-page summary of the program. Then I will be handing to Dave Austin, who is going to show you some examples of the program.

ALLPlay aims to create a culture of inclusion for children with disabilities in sport by investigating ways to facilitate greater participation and engagement on the sporting field. Ultimately the research aims to reduce the barriers for children with disabilities and what they face when they are trying to play organised sports.

Our first group that we are focusing on is children with autism. The reason for that is that if we look at all of the groups of children with disability, the one in five children who will have some sort of developmental challenge in their lives — children with autism, we argue — have the most significant difficulties that affect social functioning, psychiatric, mental health, motor functioning, family functioning and broader. We have a saying in our group then that if we get our program right for children for autism, then we will be able to reach all of the children.

The idea for the ALLPlay program was conceived in 2013, and it was based on three pieces of work. The first piece of work was my 20 years of research looking at the motor and social profile of children across the spectrum. In that work we published probably 100 journal articles showing gait abnormalities, upper limb problems, problems with motor preparation, coordination problems and so on. The second piece of work then was that after that 20 years we sat back and said, 'What's happening? Do we have a really good evidence base to refer children, to improve their coordination, to assist them to overcome their gait abnormalities, to promote inclusion in sports?'. And there was nothing really in the literature. The third piece that motivated ALLPlay was from my work as a clinical psychologist where I have worked with children for the last 20 years who have autism. I was starting to notice a pattern — that the groups of children with autism who are participating in organised sports and had those opportunities from a young age and were well supported seemed anecdotally from a clinical perspective to do better than children who did not receive those benefits.

That is how ALLPlay started in 2013. But then the idea for ALLPlay, an inclusive program of research to connect with the AFL, came from my personal experience as a parent. I have two children who do not have any disabilities at all. I was watching them play Auskick when they were young and thinking, 'Gosh, there aren't any people with autism at this Auskick centre and what a terrible thing it is that my children get to have all of these benefits and I do not see any children with disability here'. For me as a parent, that was a really confronting day to notice that.

I then had the great fortune to meet Logan Whitaker, who then was the Victorian AFL inclusion manager. Over a quick conversation we realised that as a university our research agenda was aligning very well with the aspirations of the AFL. Logan is going to be able to speak to the AFL specifically. We then spent the next two years developing the concept and meeting with the AFL, which ended up in a statewide contract for us, to use the term, take the research engine of Deakin University and wrap it around the initiatives that the AFL was doing. Six months later we received a generous donation of \$1 million from Moose Toys to really develop ALLPlay as the model and to have this as a national model for all children. This funding has enabled us to set ALLPlay up. The first 12 months — we are just 12 months into it — has been focusing on setting up.

The set-up of that initially was a survey that went out to 800 families who are participating in Auskick in Victoria. That is a survey that has looked at what are the barriers, what are the facilitators and what are the goals — what is the issue — before we go in and create something and build something and do research, to hear from parents and coaches what the issues are. Unfortunately that research is not finished — it is being analysed

as we speak — so I cannot table any of that data. But what I can say is that it was a very large representation of parents who have a child with autism who completed the survey.

The CHAIR — Can I ask what the breakdown of gender was, boys and girls? You do not have that data yet? I was just curious because it is the AFL.

Prof. RINEHART — That is right.

The CHAIR — I know we have women in AFL now, which is fantastic, but I am just curious about whether there were more young boys.

Prof. RINEHART — There were more boys than girls. It would be nice to go back to that data in about 10 years and see if we can increase the number of girls. I am sorry, but I do not have all the details except for a couple of snapshot highlights today.

ALLPlay consists of four main pieces of research and action on the ground. The first piece is what we are calling a pre-learn day. This is a partnership with St Kilda Football Club, Moose Toys, Deakin University and of course the AFL, who is running this day. This is a day we are running as a pilot. We are inviting a group of children with autism who have participated in our research to come and have an experience of Auskick in a safe, autism-friendly environment that we are setting up at the St Kilda Football Club.

Pre-learning, of course, is a very important concept for children with autism. Putting children in the deep end quickly without proper transition might mean that they are not going to be successful. So we are looking at this concept of perhaps if there are pre-learn opportunities before parents have to pay for Auskick and actually turn up to centres, then this model might be one of the models that we adopt to promote the inclusion of children in sport. It might just be that there is nothing in our community that takes that first step for families. Anecdotally we hear from families that they never want to get anything wrong for their child who has a disability, who has autism, so sometimes they will not try something rather than try and fail. That is one piece of work, and that will be happening in a couple of weeks time.

The second piece of work that is being established — and again I have to preface this by saying it is research, it is in development — is the concept of our buddy program, where we are going to buddy up the child with autism with an older able child as a way to promote inclusion in Auskick. But more than that, our vision here is to start to break down some of the attitudes towards children with disability that might be preventing families from feeling safe in an Auskick environment. That work will commence this year. We now run on a football season, which is strange for academics.

Mr FINN — It is not a bad idea. It could work.

The CHAIR — Are you suggesting that for politicians?

Mr FINN — I think it is a very good idea.

Prof. RINEHART — On the third piece of work, when we started the research we only had a state contract with the AFL. Now we have a national contract and partnership, we are going to collect data on a national basis, so we will have both. I forgot to say that the million dollars of funding that we got from Moose enabled an Australian, if not a world, first — that is, in a research centre focused on autism to have Logan Whitaker appointed, who is half the AFL but also half within our research centre. Logan is now the national inclusion manager in Australia, so we are going to be working literally hand in hand over the next three years to develop this and to get it right. I say it is a first because we certainly have never had an AFL member in our research centre, but it is walking the walk in terms of what needs to happen to have change and everyone not sitting in their silos with a lot of good ideas.

Perhaps another part of the ALLPlay model is that we recognise, and I certainly recognise as a practising psychologist, that there are a lot of good ideas in the autism space. There are many great initiatives but small amounts of funding that get piloted — something starts and it never upscales and does not stay. So part of the thinking of ALLPlay is to get the very best from everywhere and bring it together. Dave will talk to you about how we are going to do that.

And then the fourth piece of work, before I hand over to Dave, is very important from a prescription perspective, and that is a pre/post study. It is beyond anecdotal — ‘We think this is good’ — and looking at a group of children with autism before and after they participate in Auskick compared to a group of children who are not participating in organised sport. We will be looking at motor development, social and family functioning, parental mental health, the full gamut — their movement, their gait — to see what are the benefits. Because again, there are a lot of good ideas about what are the benefits but there is no data in this space. This is crucial. Our aspiration is that if one day a child is diagnosed with autism, instead of just coming to see me as a clinician or an OT, the GP says, ‘I’m going to prescribe sport for you, and for children of your son’s or daughter’s age, here are the benefits that have been documented in research to encourage you to go and do that’. It is creating an intervention in a naturalistic environment. That is critical for children with autism, and that is what is missing. If we are just thinking about interventions for autism as educators or clinicians or in whatever space, we need to be creating interventions where children are developing and thriving with other children in the natural landscape of childhood.

Just to finish up then from ALLPlay, I am sure one of the your questions will be, ‘What about girls?’ — that was everyone’s question as soon as this program was launched — so we are also going to be studying a bit of a franchise of ALLPlay, if you like. The next cab off the rank is ALLPlay Dance, because we recognise that there are great needs in the dance area as well. There are a lot of little girls who want to do dance and they cannot. Again, we have some of that data coming through.

Through our work looking at attitudes and making changes through sport and in the community and reaching dads and reaching children who are non-disabled, we want to reach up and also have an ALLWork model as our aspiration going forward. So we have a lofty ambition, but so far we have excellent feedback from the community.

Now you are probably wondering, ‘What is this ALLPlay thing? What is the tangible?’, so Dave is going to be able to present on that.

Visual presentation.

Assoc. Prof. AUSTIN — Thanks, Nicole, and thanks to the panel for having us here. I am the director of digital advancement in the school of psychology. My area is online delivery of psychological services, so that is how I became involved with the Deakin child study centre.

The reason we have got a digital solution, at least in part, to this issue of how do we get Auskick around Australia resourced and get cultural change around inclusion — that kind of thing — is because Auskick is huge around Australia. Before I move on to how big that is, if you have a look at this very quick bit of early research we did last year when we asked 61 parents of autistic kids, ‘What are the perceived facilitators?’, every single one said, ‘The coach’ — unsurprisingly. The coach has to understand and have knowledge about what autism is and what the kids need.

Then the next top ones are other parents and the other kids. It is a totally human problem, and so for a totally human solution to that we need to upskill and build cultural awareness and understanding and empathy amongst coaches, parents and kids. But there are a lot of them — 400 000-odd parents, 250 000 kids and 15 000 coaches in over 4700 Auskick centres in every state and territory around Australia. These are all volunteers too, so when we say ‘coaches’ here, these are the mums and dads who go along voluntarily and take these kids through their programs. We do not have an audience that we can sit down and train, if you like, but we have an audience who are really interested and really connected to their community. That is our opportunity, but how do we upskill those people? We have to do it via the web, basically. We cannot send out an army of trainers or get them all attending a course, but we can deliver fantastic world’s best content via the web and the app.

There are three key groups, as I said: coaches, parents and kids. Basically the website and the app give you free access to an extensive library of four different types of resources: quick tips, which is literally a sentence or two — it does not seem very powerful, but if it is literally minutes before the start of an Auskick session and the coach finds out they have got a kid with a disability coming, that might be all they have time to get on their smart phone. If people have got a bit more time, they can watch some short videos. Animations might suit some people better depending on their learning style, or certainly the kids might prefer the animated lessons. And there are also what we call footy stories, which are the social stories largely for the kids with autism. In the footy story library there are 18 different illustrated stories which explain all facets of attending Auskick, from just

generally what is the sequence of Auskick sessions to what to do about physical contact with other kids and what happens if there is a lot of noise. They show 18 different ways that parents or therapists or coaches could orient the child to an Auskick session before they start — the pre-learn concept, as Nicole mentioned.

Amongst the videos, they need to be really engaging. The coaches are largely a motivated group in that they are great people who volunteer for the community, but still how do we want them to upskill? One of the ways is to have real superstars delivering the content. We have 13 of the current senior AFL coaches who have all donated their time and effort to film content not just for the coach part of the website but also for parents — encouraging the parents and explaining what the parents can do. Nathan Buckley is one of the 13 AFL coaches delivering that content, which is great.

The women's league is exploding at the moment, as you are probably well aware. Mo Hope from Collingwood has contributed material to our skills video to show the kids how to handball, kick, mark and that kind of thing. She is a fantastic role model for girls obviously, because we are trying to promote that. Gill himself is filming our welcome video today, isn't he? Is it today?

Mr WHITAKER — It is this week.

Prof. RINEHART — It is Wednesday.

Assoc. Prof. AUSTIN — Okay, it is this week.

Prof. RINEHART — He was a hard man to pin down.

Assoc. Prof. AUSTIN — Yes. The website and app launch is on the 18th of this month, so it is all happening; you will see Gill welcoming everyone to the ALLPlay initiative from that date.

I will play you the video, but maybe we are not going to get much audio.

Video shown.

Assoc. Prof. AUSTIN — No, it is up full, and I did get warned it may not work. Anyway, Nathan does a great job there.

The CHAIR — I think what you can do is email it to our secretary, Greg, and he can pass it on to us so we can watch it later.

Assoc. Prof. AUSTIN — Fantastic, will do. Honestly, by 18 March — so we are talking 12 days or so — it will all be just there. You can look at it at ALLPlay.org.au, and the app will be in the App Store and on Google Play.

Then we have footy stories. As anyone who works extensively with kids with autism knows, social stories are a really key therapeutic and behavioural aid. As I said, there are 18 different stories here that the kids, the parents and the coaches kind of pick and choose to find what best suits the child in terms of what their particular anxieties and challenges are.

In the example here you can see even in the right-hand frame that it is about explaining things like what the right clothing is. Kids with autism often have issues around dressing, dressing in certain ways and routines, so it explains what you do at Auskick. I know it is simple, but it is one of those classic evidence-based things that just works all the time in the autism space. So we have got that on our website and the app. The animations have got audio as well, but these are really nice, short animations for kids, coaches and parents. I will just play one here.

Video shown.

Assoc. Prof. AUSTIN — We played that one because, whilst there are dozens of these animations, this one is nice and is almost a motto for the entire program really. As Logan will tell you, coaches often have a mindset that their job is to change the child, to improve the child. That is fair enough; you understand that in an elite kind of setting. But Auskick is not footy training. Auskick is a community sport-related event. So what we want to change is the culture around Auskick coaching — that they are not there to train the next Brownlow

medallist, that it is about kids having fun. So it is not about changing the kids, yelling at them and getting them to play better; it is about having them all participate together. So ‘Change the activity, not the child’ is a really nice mantra. If we could get that message embedded in the Auskick community, that would be a huge, huge win.

Then of course this is just our year one. We are not here for one season. This is an ongoing AFL and Deakin initiative. We plan to still be doing this through to retirement, I would have thought. Nick and Logan?

Prof. RINEHART — Yes, right through to retirement.

Assoc. Prof. AUSTIN — So every year we implant a new release of the website in the app, so it is v1 this year, but in v2 next year we will have a searchable directory of sports inclusion programs, not just footy. As Nicole suggested, with ALLPlay we are trying to establish best practice in the sporting industry within Auskick, but then we plan to roll out that model, if you like, through other sporting codes. At the moment our materials are fantastic in terms of the coaching upskilling, but it is not an accredited course — it is all volunteer, it is not tracked, it is not assessed. Ultimately we would like to have an accredited inclusive coaching practices type of certificate that we could offer online.

Of course Nicole mentioned the buddy system. We would like a computer game based activity. Kids with autism, as you would know, love computer games. That is another great way to get them to lower their anxiety about what to expect at Auskick. If we can have an Auskick session online, they can practise what to do and where to go and see how people talk and what to expect. In the same way we will have a virtual reality experience for next year where kids can actually put on those virtual reality goggles, drop the smart phone in and actually experience an Auskick session in the safety of their own home. Of course that is just our wish list; we will get everyone else’s wish list at the end of this season when we ask them what they liked and did not like about our web resources. That is very exciting for our future.

We are really confident, with Logan’s guidance and experience and Nicole’s obviously in the clinical space, that with that combination ALLPlay online will be fantastic. Come 18 March, please check it out at ALLPlay.org.au. Logan assures me that in his world of inclusive sports this will be the best resource available for coaches, parents and kids, not just in Australia — I was hoping for just in Australia — but Logan seems to think potentially the world. We are really excited about that because we have got a great team, and we have only just started. As you can tell, with Moose Toys and the AFL we have got great backers for the program. So we are really excited about the future.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Logan, did you want to make any comments, or will we just go straight to questions? I am just mindful of the time, that is all.

Prof. WHITAKER — Yes, straight to questions is fine. If there is anything specific you would like to know about the AFL, I am happy to answer.

The CHAIR — I was actually a bit interested in the latest research around children with ASD, some of the key directions in that research, particularly in relation to genetics — which I think probably David might be answering — and the role of co-occurring conditions in children with ASD and how they will impact on their participation, particularly in this program. Also then, on top of that, how critical is physical activity to children with ASD, and is there any current research around that?

Assoc. Prof. AUSTIN — Could I perhaps start on that and throw to you, Logan. There is some research we have done on screen time — a lot of people are doing that research because kids with autism do spend a lot of time with devices; it is a natural affinity that they have — and so we want to leverage that of course by delivering good, engaging material online. But ultimately our goal is to get them offline, because we do know from the other side of research that whilst they learn a lot online and it really supports a lot of their learning in terms of language development, they are not getting the social development online. We want to encourage them to move from online to offline. I think if I can throw to you, Logan — instantly I thought about the three different models for Auskick with these kids that you are applying.

Mr WHITAKER — One of the key things that we probably have not touched on is exactly how we are doing this on the ground. Within that, while I was in Victoria as the inclusion manager there, we came up with an all-abilities Auskick model, and there are three different delivery models there. One is a broad education

piece for every Auskick centre in Victoria, of which there are over 700. Because through our consultative phase we spoke to a lot of families that have experienced their Auskick centre taking the kid on and doing an amazing job with really little direction from anyone within the AFL staff, but we also heard the opposite. We heard from families who had been knocked back from Auskick by a volunteer parent who just did not feel that they could take that child on.

There was a broad education piece for all of them: ‘One, we have to accept any child into our Auskick centres. We have to make a reasonable adjustment under the Equal Opportunity Act’, which certainly opened some volunteers’ eyes. At the end of the day Auskick volunteers are all pretty good people. They are giving up their time at 8 o’clock on a Saturday morning in the freezing cold Melbourne winter to teach kids how to play footy. Most of them are pretty good people. They just have not been exposed to someone with a disability before, and because they do not want to do or say the wrong thing, they often do nothing at all, which is the worst thing. So it is a broad education piece for all of those Auskick centres to say, ‘There is support out there, but we also have to be able to make a reasonable adjustment for these kids to be included’.

The next model is a side-by-side model, and it is by far the most popular model because it is that integrated model. It is on the same football field at the same time as all the other kids that are playing, whereas in an Auskick centre it is generally split up into grade groups, so you have got your grade 1 kids together, 2, 3 and so on. We have also set up another group with the all-abilities kids. It is on the same oval at the same time, so parents are going along to a community event that other parents within the community are all going to. However, they are participating in an area that is still a little bit extra supported, with a little bit more time for the child to execute their skills and a little bit of a safer environment, while it is still there on the same oval with everybody else. The key as well to that is the encouragement of those kids. After six months, a year, however long, if they are in grade 3, they will more than likely try to cross the oval and join in grade 3 with all of the other kids, with the safety net that if that does not work this week, it is okay, they can come back to the all-abilities group and play there.

We have also then got the disability-specific model, which we were not so sure about because it is still a segregated model: it is that group of kids with a disability playing on their own over here. However, we felt that it was really necessary to have that as a choice. And at the end of the day parents do now have a choice of which model they would like to participate in, and that one is there. I go out to these centres and I see families there that say, ‘If it is not for this, we wouldn’t be here. We couldn’t go to a mainstream Auskick centre regardless of side by side. It needs to be set up in this environment’. Most of those are set up in special schools, in an environment that kids are used to and comfortable with. And do not get me wrong, there are still meltdowns that happen because they come to school on a Saturday and their teacher is not there — ‘When I come to school my teacher is here’. But it is an environment that they quickly do get used to because they are there every day of the week. We set them up in those really comfortable environments. We upskill them in football, with the hope to then move them through into a side-by-side model, where they can start to slowly, step by step, integrate into the community. What we hope to see in a couple of years time is a child that starts out over here and works their way up into the grade 3 group, and all of a sudden, through the support we have been able to provide in a football environment with ALLPlay behind it, they are now able to participate in grade 3 with all the other kids.

There are three different models there that provide those families with choice. If they think, ‘All right, we’re just going to have a crack at mainstream. We’re going to go along and it’s going to be supported and we’ve got these resources now’, then that is there. If they think, ‘Oh no, side by side is probably for us’, then that is there. Also they have got that. Whereas three years ago and before we had this funding and before we looked at Auskick, it was just that one cookie-cutter fit: if it does not work for you, bad luck.

The CHAIR — I just wondered if you could talk to the current research around the physical activity.

Prof. RINEHART — Sure. Our group has recently published a systematic review on physical activity in children with autism, and I would be happy to provide that to you.

The CHAIR — That would be good — yes, please.

Prof. RINEHART — Essentially the evidence is mixed, but on balance children with autism spectrum disorders are having less opportunity for physical activity, so that is taken from a whole lot of studies from around the world. We are currently engaged in a physical activity study, looking at young children with autism, so that we can get some local data on that. We are very interested in the correlates of physical activity, touching

on your point about comorbidity. We know that about three-quarters of children with autism also have ADHD. It is a rule rather than the exception to have motor difficulties. What we want to do is to drill down on the needs of children by profile or subtype or phenotype. Touching on the genetic point, there is a group of children whose needs will relate more to the ADHD comorbidity than to necessarily the autism as a primary diagnosis. There will be another group of children whose needs relate to anxiety. So as we develop the ALLPlay model, it needs to speak to all of the different phenotypes of autism and needs within that. It is complex, and I think if we develop ALLPlay without taking that complexity into account, then we are going to develop something that is not useful for everybody.

I think what can happen in the autism research field and in clinical practice is that when we see the word ‘autism’ it is such a big word that we think every struggle a child is having is to do with autism. I think that is a mistake because sometimes it is not autism. Sometimes it is an experience that the child has had, it is a comorbidity, it is something else. So I think we need to be very careful about that, just so that we do not miss that vital ingredient that might meet the needs of the child. I have touched on phenotyping, comorbidities and physical activity. Have I answered the question?

The CHAIR — I think so, thank you.

Ms McLEISH — This is really quite an interesting concept, and I look forward to seeing how it pans out and also how you progress into other sports. I was interested probably in the role of GPs. You were talking before, Nicole, that one of the pillars with the pre/post study was looking for GPs to diagnose a need for sport. Are the GPs engaged in any way through either this program or other work that you have been doing?

Prof. RINEHART — We have started with engaging with paediatricians. I work at the Melbourne Children’s Clinic, where they have got a large group of paediatricians. The way that we have engaged them early on in the study is that they are referring their patients to the pre/post study so that as we develop the evidence we can have a feedback loop to the families and the paediatricians about the outcomes on the ground. But then our next step, once we have got some evidence, will be to go to GPs and start to engage them and the other allied health professions.

Ms McLEISH — And they are very open to the ideas?

Prof. RINEHART — Look, our feedback has been very positive. It is not rocket science what we are proposing, but it is a new paradigm and a new model for us as researchers. It is driven by the belief that we have been doing business in a certain way for so long but we needed something like ALLPlay to shake it up and to get professionals and researchers and industry working together in a new way.

Ms McLEISH — We have heard from parents, for example, whose kids have been involved in acting, others in swimming lessons, and I certainly know families that have kids playing hockey. Have you had any feedback on inclusion in those sorts of sports, not in the ALLPlay model but just more generally?

Prof. RINEHART — More generally, currently we have got a survey that is open. That is in collaboration with the NDIA. It is open online right now; you can have a look at it. The website is not rolling off my tongue, but I will forward it. In that we are looking more broadly about a whole list of sports and activities, right through to chess I think, so that we can find out what children are currently doing, but more importantly what they would like to do. We are getting children to respond, and that is a first for our research: we are getting it from children. They are just looking at pictures and having to indicate what they want to do, so we are getting the child’s voice in there. Another very important part of that new piece of work is we have brought in Health Economics, who have a number of questions in the survey so that we can understand the economic barriers more clearly. We can have the best anxiety intervention, the best buddy system, but if we are not carefully looking at the economics at play here, we could be missing something. We hope to use that information to move forward in our discussions with stakeholders.

Ms McLEISH — Just finally, we talked about the words ‘inclusive coaching’ and courses there, so I am imagining in my head that you can do, you know, level 1, level 2. Would you imagine that that would be across all sports, or are you thinking of AFL specifically and then it would have to be reinvented each time by a different sport?

Prof. RINEHART — I think what is going to happen is that the organisation, like the AFL, as they are doing, have to own it and develop it. But then for dance, for example, that is going to be a different kettle of fish, because we will not have an equivalent of the AFL to work with. So we are going to be having to work at a much more grassroots level. There will be commonalities, so I think there will be concepts from the AFL that we can just plug in to golf or swimming and give them the package and the resource, but then there will be individual factors.

Ms COUZENS — Thanks for coming along today, and it sounds fantastic. I know there will be a lot of people in my electorate of Geelong who will be looking forward to seeing the outcomes of the research. Many families have had horrendous, traumatic experiences with their child involved in local sport, so I think this is fantastic, so thank you. Should the state government have a direct role in supporting ASD in sport?

Prof. RINEHART — Absolutely, and I am convinced as a clinician — but let us again wait to see the data — that this type of investment will have a significant and vast reach. Anecdotally we have heard from fathers whose children with autism have participated in one of Logan’s programs for children with autism, and the heartfelt, ‘I never thought my child would get to play Auskick’, was very tangible. So we see far-reaching impacts on parents’ mental health and also another mechanism for parents to engage with children, So absolutely, yes, I do.

Mr WHITAKER — I might just touch on that quickly as well. The funding that we did receive at AFL Victoria was through Sport and Recreation Victoria through the Access for All Abilities program, so that is where those three models were developed and it really has grown from there. So there has been the involvement of state government to this point.

Ms COUZENS — But ongoing involvement, ongoing funding?

Mr WHITAKER — Absolutely ongoing.

Ms COUZENS — It is all really critical obviously.

Mr WHITAKER — Absolutely.

Ms COUZENS — David, you talked about training volunteers and their online training, which looks fantastic. Will there be — and maybe this is too early — opportunities for volunteer coaches, for example, to be involved in direct training rather than online only?

Assoc. Prof. AUSTIN — The initial rollout is online only, apart from the support that Logan can provide, which he often still does. He is on the phone to coaches all the time.

Ms COUZENS — And that is at a national level?

Mr WHITAKER — At a state level that is something we are looking at. Across those all-abilities Auskick centres that we have set up over the last couple of years — we have now got 26 of them in Victoria, and we are taking more expressions of interest for 2017, so I would not be surprised if that went well over 30 — within that we are starting to look at some more support from a sport. So what can the AFL do? Can we get these volunteers into a room for a one-day forum? We have not decided yes or no on that yet, but it is certainly something we are thinking about.

In the past I have not had somewhere like this to send coaches to, so I have been going out myself to Auskick centres or speaking on the phone to coaches, without having the resources to draw on. I think now — in fact I am sure now — that I can say, ‘Hang on, jump on the ALLPlay website. Have a look at some of the resources there’, and that will support it a long way. There will definitely still be some coaches who say, ‘This is great, but can we have some more’ — absolutely. So from a sports perspective that is something we are looking at, absolutely, but whether or not that will be run through ALLPlay I think is a decision yet to be made.

Mr FINN — I know it is early days, but I am just wondering if there are any signs at this time that it is helping kids with autism with their teamwork or dealing with other people. You know, there are social issues that we have to deal with. Is there any evidence at this point that Auskick helps in that area?

Prof. RINEHART — There is no systematic evidence, but anecdotally and what we are trying to work up is, if you think about AFL as a sport, again there are many different aspects that we can leverage to teach social skills. So if we think about a core deficit of children with autism, which is a theory of mind, being reading the play, our hypothesis is that helping children to read the play about why that boy walked that way or threw the ball or called out could be learned in a footy setting and then translated into the community, and critically we do know that there are more boys affected than girls, and we also know that it is often the mums who are involved in intervention and support. This will be a first for dads to have an opportunity on a common ground, if they are interested in AFL, to become involved in the therapy using AFL analogies.

But also we believe that it will help, at that early stage of diagnosis, to give a reference for dads to understand these important concepts. At the moment a lot of dads will say to us, ‘We don’t want to go and have a look at that autism website. It’s too confronting; it’s too much’. ALLPlay will have a lot of the concepts within it that might be a baby step to deeper knowledge.

Mr FINN — And you will be reporting annually, or how will you get that message out there that it is all happening?

Prof. RINEHART — We will be disseminating through the media. We will be disseminating through publications, conferences and anybody who will listen to us in the process.

Mr FINN — I know that feeling.

Prof. RINEHART — That is how we will spread the word. We are hoping it will be one of those things that people hear about and start to refer to and talk about.

Mr FINN — I am not sure who I should direct this question to, but just how difficult was it to get the AFL involved?

Prof. RINEHART — Me, in short. It was hard, but when you think about it, it was not hard. Let me just clarify that. After that game where I was watching my son play Auskick, I literally emailed my Auskick centre and said, ‘Hello, my name is Professor Nicole Rinehart. I have got these interests, can I meet with you?’. And we met, and then they referred me directly to Logan.

Logan organised meetings at AFL House, and they were extremely enthusiastic and excited, but because it was a first, nobody really knew how to go about it. And of course we needed funding, but very quickly — I think as we all agreed this is a human rights issue — the AFL very generously supported half of a PhD scholarship and Deakin University committed the other half. So we have AFL PhD scholars in the autism space for the first time.

Mr FINN — How long ago was that, could I ask?

Prof. RINEHART — That was 18 months ago, and that piece of work was critical. It took a while, but it was good to get it right at the start, but that is what then leveraged us to the urgent need for larger scale funding and took us to Moose Toys, where they saw the idea as something useful.

Mr FINN — Logan, what has been the attitude at AFL House that you have picked up?

Mr WHITAKER — Something I saw while I was at AFL Victoria is that certainly working with people with disabilities is not front of mind or was not front of mind, and simply by having a full-time resource within the office, which was me, that attitude slowly changed, because people started to think about, ‘Logan’s here doing that stuff with kids with disabilities’. Whereas before that it would be in the back of their minds and it would not be something that would come up, and when a program did come up that they were not sure about or someone from a special school approached them, they would say, ‘Oh yeah, we can talk to Logan about that now’, and they just had to walk across the office to do that. So it was really interesting to see how everyone’s mindset shifted over a couple of years simply by having someone in the building who was specialising, for want of a better term, in that space.

It is slowly starting to happen within the AFL as well. So I have been in the national role since December — so very, very new — but already have had people come over to me from the school setting saying, ‘We’re doing this work in schools, setting up some ambassadors. Shall we set up some AFL ambassadors to work with

special schools as well?’. And they would not have thought about that before, because I was not in the building, and simply by being there, being front of mind and them looking across the office and saying, ‘Oh yeah, there’s that Logan guy. He works with the disabled kids’, all of a sudden they are thinking more about it. So absolutely the mindset is shifting, and watching that culture change is something that I am really interested in seeing happen, because with having that constant reminder there we have started to get to the point at AFL Victoria where I was very big on building that into other departments’ work plans.

When I first started anything that had the disability label on it landed on my desk, regardless of where it sat. That is not right. People with a disability are across every different program area within the AFL. There are umpires with disabilities, coaches, participants, fans. If there is an umpiring program for people with disabilities, it should sit within umpiring. So that is what we have started to get to within AFL Victoria, which is that the umpiring department owned the all-abilities umpiring program that we ran. I was there to provide support and to help where required, but this is an umpiring program first and foremost. So I am really excited to watch that shift is well. It is something I am very big on — that just because it has disability on it does not mean it comes to my desk.

Mr FINN — That is good. I say more power to you, and I certainly look forward to seeing how this develops over the next few years — and beyond, hopefully.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your presentation today, and I also look forward to the 18th of this month, when you launch the program. So thanks again, much appreciated, and good luck with the program.

Mr WHITAKER — Thank you.

Prof. RINEHART — Thank you.

Assoc. Prof. AUSTIN — Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.