



Protecting and Promoting the  
**Health of NFL Players:**  
Legal and Ethical Analysis and Recommendations

# Chapter 6

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## **SUMMARY:** **Personal Doctors**



This document is a summary of the full chapter on personal doctors in the Report *Protecting and Promoting the Health of NFL Players: Legal and Ethical Analysis and Recommendations*. The full chapter includes the following sections: (A) Background; (B) Current Legal Obligations; (C) Current Ethical Codes; (D) Current Practices; (E) Enforcement of Legal and Ethical Obligations; and, (F) Recommendations. Here, we provide our Recommendations, with only the minimum necessary background information. For more information and analysis of the role and responsibilities of personal doctors, including relevant citations, please see the full chapter.

Players might have personal doctors – as opposed those employed by the clubs – they see as primary care physicians or for other specific ailments. Consequently, to the extent players choose to utilize the services of their own doctor (maybe even for a second opinion), these doctors too are an important stakeholder in ensuring and promoting player health. While controversy exists about the role of club doctors, the responsibilities of a player’s personal doctor are clear: a player’s personal doctor’s first and only loyalty is to the player, and the doctor is thus bound to confidentially provide care within an acceptable standard of care.

Importantly, personal doctors have no relationship with or responsibilities to the NFL or NFL clubs.

Personal doctors might be the least utilized of the doctors discussed in this Report. In talking with players, several indicated that the frequent moves from city to city and their busy schedules made finding and seeing a personal doctor problematic. Consequently, players principally rely on club doctors and second opinion doctors for their care. In some circumstances, a second opinion doctor might also be or become the player’s personal doctor.

## Recommendations Concerning Personal Doctors

While personal doctors might not supply care as regularly as club doctors, they can be an important and trusted source of medical advice and guidance provided solely in the player’s interest. While our recommendations below are principally targeted at other stakeholders, they concern the use of personal doctors and thus we include them here.

### Goal 1: To help players become proactive guardians of their own health.

#### **Recommendation 6:1-A: The NFLPA and clubs should take steps to facilitate players’ usage of personal doctors.**

As discussed above, personal doctors can provide an important source of medical care and advice focused solely on the player. In particular, personal doctors can provide an important perspective to players considering their long-term health and retirement. However, some of the players we interviewed indicated that logistical challenges made seeing personal doctors difficult. The NFLPA and clubs should seek to bridge that gap perhaps by generating lists of doctors for players to consider. It might be even better to engage a third-party care navigation service to assist the players to avoid any appearance of conflict of interest. Another approach would be for club staff to remind players about the importance of having a personal doctor, or to confirm annually that all players who wish to have such a relationship have in fact identified a personal doctor with which they are happy. These services are particularly important for those players who have recently moved to a new city and such players should thus be given particular consideration. Players should also be given special attention when they leave the NFL to ensure smooth transition to a new medical care team.

#### **Recommendation 6:1-B: Players should receive a physical from their own doctor as soon as possible after each season.**

At the conclusion of each season, players receive a physical from the club doctor that will list any conditions the player has at that time. While the club doctor may provide outgoing and ongoing medical advice to the player, the player should check those diagnoses and prognoses against those of an independent doctor. Additionally, given the physical and mental tolls of an NFL season, it would be wise for players to annually review their overall health with their own doctor to inform their decision-making about that offseason as well as the future of their career, including whether to retire. This physical can also be used to establish baseline measures of health for players upon retirement and to screen players for the range of medical issues for which young men should seek regular medical consultation. Moreover, having a healthcare

## Recommendations Concerning Personal Doctors – continued

provider familiar with their health, injury history, habits, etc., will help ensure players can make a more seamless transition into post-play health and healthcare.

A personal physical can also provide important legal and financial protections to players. In the event the club terminates the player's contract during the offseason, the club is generally under no obligation to pay the player any additional money unless the player was injured. The club's season-end physical might describe the player as healthy. However, unless the player obtains a physical which disagrees with the club around the same time as the club's season-end physical, it will be difficult for the player to dispute the club's assertion that he was healthy at the time his contract was terminated. The player's personal doctor, via a season-end physical, might provide a medical opinion that supports the player's position.