

Training and Education Issues in the Fitness Industry

By Dr Dion Klein

Recently, the training and education of fitness instructors and personal trainers have caught the eye of the media and the legal industry in Australia and the United States. Some of the headlines include:

State to Mount Probe Into Out-Of-Shape Fitness Industry (The Age 15/08/2007)

Colleges 'Unfit' To Train Gym Staff (The Age 29/03/2007)

Personal Trainers File Class Action for Negligent Instruction

Most Personal Trainers Flunk Test in UCLA Study

Challenges in Victoria

Some private colleges in Victoria admitted that there was a possibility that the training of their fitness instructors may not have been meeting the basic standards. Additionally, some of the colleges had underqualified staff, lack of suitable equipment and dodgy student testing.

The Training Organisation's Duty of Care

Though RTO's can pass audits in their area of scope, there is still scrutiny amongst trainers and accrediting agencies as to the validity and reliability of online training in particular industries, especially those that relate to health, complimentary therapies and fitness education. Maybe a recent case in the USA may set precedence.

Eighteen personal trainers filed a class action suit against an organisation that trained them claiming the online personal trainer certification program was negligent and exposed the public and the trainers to risk. Additionally, they claimed the organisation provided defective training materials and inadequate instruction. The marketing materials claimed that students would be competent and effective personal trainers. In reality, their materials were riddled with errors that could lead to serious injury when put in practice; therefore, this exposed the public to unsafe exercise practices and the trainers to personal liability.

(Reference: "Dangerous Personal Trainers Fight Back -- File Suit Against Certification Provider, March 6, 2007)

Can your personal trainers pass the test?

A research study conducted at UCLA (USA) found that personal trainers holding a college degree or certification by a top-notch organisation is a better gauge of fitness knowledge than experience. In the study (2002), 115 personal trainers completed a questionnaire on nutrition, health screening, fitness-testing protocols, exercise prescriptions and dealing with special needs. Those with at least a bachelor's degree in human movement or exercise science averaged 68 percent on the test, while others averaged 37 percent. PTs with five or more years of experience scored poorly on the exam, receiving an average of only 44 percent correct; those with less experience averaged 42 percent. Only 19 percent of the participants had a fitness-related degree, while 11 percent were certified by the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) or the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA). Trainers who had both a fitness-related degree and one of the certifications averaged 85 percent on the knowledge test.

Consider some of these trends in hiring personal training and fitness staff in the United States:

- Many owners do not hire people with Internet Certifications in fitness.
- Personal trainer minimum standard is either a college degree or a certification from a reputable agency.
- Potential personal trainers must pass a three-page in-house exam and hold a reputable certification.

(Reference: PERSONAL TRAINERS WYOMING, 2007)

Lack of knowledge can increase the risk of injury to clients and the financial risk to your health club. As the consumer interest of health and fitness increases, the possibility of lawsuits and personal injury claims against personal trainers also increases. The competencies, content and assessment requirements of the Fitness Industry training package are quite comprehensive. The fitness industry must begin to take ownership and scrutinise the quality of education being delivered and promote quality education providers.