

PROLIFERATION OF FITNESS CENTRES IN NIGERIA: THE NEED FOR CERTIFICATION AND REGULATION OF FITNESS PROVIDERS

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ABSTRACT

There is an increase in the desire by Nigerians to exercise due to and increased awareness of the numerous benefits of exercise. However, due to several factors, many people have joined the league of individuals who visit fitness centres. Unlike before, there is a tremendous increase in the number of health/fitness centres in Nigerian cities. However, many of these fitness centres do not follow the acceptable ethics and code of conduct for the operation and establishment of a fitness centre. This paper having observed the proliferation of health and fitness centres in Nigeria therefore strongly positioned that there is an urgent need for the accreditation and certification of health and fitness centres in Nigeria, and in addition, agitates that only qualified professionals should be allowed to render these services to the clients to ensure the safety of the individuals. This will invariably reduce the health risk associated with services rendered by quacks, moreso, when exercise, just like drugs can be abused if the adequate diagnosis and prescriptions are not adhering to. Hence, the need for professionalism of the fitness industry. The primary purpose of a certification will always be to protect the public from harm by assessing if the professional meets established levels of competence in the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to perform the job in a safe and effective manner.

Keywords: Proliferation, asymptomatic, certification, health ethics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Exercise training is a sub-category of physical activity in which planned, structured, and repetitive bodily movements are performed to maintain or improve one or more attributes of physical fitness and thus it is a structured intervention over a defined period of time (Piepoli et al., 2010). In response to the need to satisfy the desire to keep fit and live healthy lives, there has cropped up series of services including medical services, health and wellness-related services and traditional services. The health and wellness-related service providers are concerned with the promotion of the optimum health of the totality of the individual. There is currently an increased awareness of the importance of exercise and the relevance of fitness clinics in the promotion of good health and physical fitness. It is therefore not surprising that there has in recent times, been an increase in the establishment of fitness centres in our society and this can be conceded as a positive step towards improving the health and fitness status of the populace (Agwubike & Ogbouma, 2010).

Proliferation as used in the paper refers to unregulated increase in the number of fitness centres. Certification on the other hand refers to making sure that personnel working in health and fitness industries have the minimum qualification in health and fitness before they apply for certification in their various organisations or associations. Regulation implies that providers of health and fitness centres apply for registration and get license to operate and that they follow the scope practice as recommended by the committee of accreditation. According to Iwuoha, (2015) the growth in demand for fitness and weight loss services in Africa is coming from a fast-growing and consumption-driven section of its population. Africans are becoming health and fitness-conscious because they understand the benefits of being fit and healthy. Regular exercise and an ideal body weight significantly reduce the likelihood of falling sick. This is one of the biggest reasons why people are motivated to stay fit and healthy. To satisfy the need to stay fit and healthy, fitness clubs (or gyms) and weight loss programmes are setting up within and around neighbourhoods, residential and office areas where people who need these services can easily access them. South Africa leads the continent in the fitness industry. According to Ventures Africa, available data shows that about 60 percent of South Africa's population is overweight. No wonder the country has the highest density of gyms and health clubs on the continent. Nairobi (Kenya) and Lagos (Nigeria) have also become booming markets for the fitness business. Impressive economic growth, rapid urbanization and changing

lifestyles due to the growing influence of western cultures and diets are just a few of the factors responsible for the growing demand for fitness services in several countries on the continent (Iwuoha, 2015).

Daily increase in the number of fitness centres in most Nigerian urban cities characterised the vogue in the present day sports conscious Nigerian society. Examples abound here and there has to create inquisitiveness among the citizenry. A few instances of available fitness centres in Nigeria include Club Arcade, Ikoyi and Federal palace clubs in Lagos, Intercontinental Hotel fitness centre, Oriental Hotel wellness and Gym, Nicon Nuga and Sheraton in Abuja and Bekandims Recreation and Jomola Fitness Centres in Ilorin, and many more sprang across major cities in Nigeria. Better still, it was probably thought of as centres where weight reduction activities are provided (Obiyemi, 2007).

In the present circumstance of an average Nigerian's crave for wealth, the tendency of associating the establishment of fitness centres to allow operators access to secure sufficient funds from such ventures could not be ruled out. This is based on the fact that the economic downturn of Nigeria as a nation knows no bound. People seek for succor in such ventures to bring wealth when it becomes clear that wealthy or comfortable Nigerians with tract records of amazing wealth go right into the establishment of fitness centres. Whichever way one looks at it, it is important to note that operating fitness centres the way they are supposed to be operated. Even with well-established guidelines for physical activity, the majority of personnel in fitness centres in major cities in Nigeria are have little or no formal education or practical experience in designing and leading exercise programmes. Physicians often give patients recommendations to exercise, but they generally do not provide specific instructions for how to exercise (Obiyemi, 2007).

Health and fitness professionals recognize the important role that physical activity plays in improving and maintaining good health (Adeogun & Dansu, 2006). Unfortunately, the lack of professional credentials held by some individuals working in fitness centres in major cities in Nigeria has slowed the acceptance of fitness professionals as legitimate members of the allied healthcare team by some healthcare providers. In an interview conducted at a popular hotel providing fitness services to clients in 2009, it was discovered that a secondary school holder was employed simply because he was able to provide a sample video of previous aerobics class. This motivated the writers to conduct a survey of some popular fitness providers in 2010, 2013 and 2015 in Lagos State. The survey revealed that most clients are not satisfied with the services provided by these fitness centres.

Based on the survey conducted, it was observed that among other things some clients expressed concern that some fitness professionals are 'under-educated'. This observation corroborates the worldwide Survey of Fitness Trends in 2014, clients ranked educated, Certified, and Experienced Fitness Professionals number 3, though it was ranked number 1 since 2008 (Walter, 2014). Concern was expressed that there is minimal or inadequate training in risk management. Clients expressed that fitness professionals often lack experience, that there was a lack of support for new trainers, and that there was also a need for further, post-qualification professional training and development to ensure that people have the necessary skills to be effective and manage risks.

Majority of clients expressed concern about what they regarded as the generally low degree of supervision of clients undertaking exercise in fitness facilities. Concern was also expressed that some centres were inadequately staffed and that trainer fatigue might create risks in fitness facilities. They also identified 'improper use of equipment' by clients as a significant issue. They commented that risks in fitness facilities can arise from client's performance of incorrect techniques or failure to follow instructions, and also poorly educated fitness trainers teaching incorrect techniques.

Clients identified a number of issues on equipment': expressing concern about the lack of maintenance of equipment, faulty equipment or the poor quality of equipment, equipment hygiene (machines not being wiped down or cleaned), and problems related to the positioning of equipment too close to other equipment or hazards. Clients identified a number of issues including lack of space in gyms and hazards created by clients (e.g. leaving weights lying around, creating tripping hazards), concern about poor layout of fitness equipment in fitness facilities (specifically, space, overcrowding and ventilation issues), and concerns about the risks posed by using outdoor areas as venues for the provision of fitness services, e.g. the provision of services on wet or uneven ground, and/or in weather that was too cold, too hot or too wet.

The simple question is that as professional, do we allow this to continue in our country? The answer is NO. So, what do we need to do as individuals, institutions and associations to reduce/ curb unprofessionalism in the fitness industry in Nigeria, there is need to emulate some developed countries' programmes, accreditation and code of practice.

Modern fitness consumers demand comprehensive programmes that are truly individualised based on their physical-activity levels, current health status, and needs and desires. Though clients may not even know it, the programmes must also take into account each individual's psychological readiness for change. The core challenge for any fitness professional is to somehow translate all of the feedback he or she

receives from health-history forms, physical assessments, and conversations with the client into a successful programme.

Why do we need to certify and regulate fitness providers in Nigeria?

The primary purpose of a certification is always to protect the public from harm by assessing if the professional meets established levels of competence in the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to perform the job in a safe and effective manner. For professional, a certification can separate him or her from others who have not proven themselves to be at the same level of competence. Thus, certified exercise physiologist will conduct pre-exercise testing before commencing any training programme. The primary purpose of pre-participation screening is to identify clients affected by unsuspected cardiovascular diseases and to prevent sudden cardiac death during exercise programme by appropriate interventions, especially when dealing with asymptomatic individuals. (Adeogun, 2009; Adeogun & Adeyeye, 2012).

A scope of practice defines the legal range of services that professionals in a given field can provide, the settings in which those services can be provided, and the guidelines or parameters that must be followed. Many factors go into defining a scope of practice, including the education, training, and certifications or licenses required to work in a given field, the laws and organisations governing the specific profession, and the laws and organisations governing complementary professions within the same field (American Council on Exercise, 2009; American College of Sports Medicine & American Heart Association, 2007).

Most laws defining a profession are determined and regulated by state regulatory agencies, including licensure. As a result, the scope of practice for licensed practitioners can vary from state to state in a given profession. In addition, most professions have organisations that serve as governing bodies within the profession that set eligibility requirements to enter educational programmes or sit for certification examinations and establish codes for professional conduct and disciplinary procedures for professionals who break these codes (American Council on Exercise, 2009).

The laws, rules, and regulations that govern a profession are established for the protection of the public. The eligibility and certification requirements to work within this legal scope of practice are defined by the professional organisations that offer such certifications. These organisations also establish codes of ethical conduct and mandate that they are upheld by certified professionals and applicants in all actions related to exercise physiologist. It is crucial for practitioners in every industry to be aware of the scope of practice for their given profession, to ensure that they practice within the realm of the specific education, experience, and demonstrated competency of their credential (American College of Sports Medicine, 2007). In America for example, two bodies are responsible for accreditation of health education programmes and exercise Sciences. They are; Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programmes (CAAHEP) and Committee on Accreditation of the Exercise Sciences (CoAES). There are also recognised national bodies and Associations in America that certify fitness, health professionals and providers. Some of them include; American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance (AAHPERD) American Association of Cardiovascular and Pulmonary Rehabilitation (AACVPR) Medical Fitness Association (MFA), American Kinesiotherapy Association (AKTA), American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM), National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) National Academy of Sports Medicine (NASM) and The Cooper Institute (American College of Sports Medicine, 2010; American College of Sports Medicine, 2015).

The British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES) is the United Kingdom professional body for professionals in science of sport and exercise. BASES have worked in association with Human Kinetics to develop Careers Guide for prospective and current sport and exercise science students. BASES represents UK sport and exercise science interests nationally and internationally, promotes careers and consultancy, organises conferences and workshops and maintains professional standards through a system of Accreditation (The British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences, 2008). According to leaders in the fitness industry, Australia is ahead of many countries in the quality of services provided, approach of management, and the level of qualified staff (Nicolee, 2003).

Scope of Practice is a draft national position statement that aims to define the scope of practice for registered Exercise Professionals. It provides clarity about their role, responsibilities and professional boundaries and reinforces many of the existing exercise professional standards and policies. The Scope of Practice provides information detailing the minimum vocational and educational requirements of each, and states what is expected of them as part of their professional obligations. The significance of the Code to professionals in exercise physiology, fitness, preventive and rehabilitative services can turn to it for guidance in professional conduct. Adherence to the Code is expected, and is based on the beliefs that exercise physiologist's critical thinkers who are accountable and responsible for their high quality competence in the practice and the delivery of exercise physiology concepts, ideas, and services (American Council on Exercise, 2009). But in Nigeria, there is no organisation or body responsible for certification

and regulation of exercise/fitness providers, which invariably puts the clients at the mercy of the health and fitness service providers some of which are not professionally qualified.

Therefore, in order to ensure that adequate health and fitness care services are provided for Nigerians and in some generally acceptable standards, ethics and norms and reduce the proliferation of fitness centres in major cities in Nigeria by non-qualified individuals, the writers are of the opinion that:

1. Commission on Accreditation of Health, exercise and fitness should be established in Nigeria to accredit and regulate health, exercise and fitness providers.
2. Nigerian Association of Sports Science and Medicine (NASSM) and NAPER-SD should be responsible for certification of personnel in health, exercise and fitness providers in Nigeria.
3. Commission on Accreditation of Health, exercise and fitness should prepare scope of practice for all health and fitness providers in Nigeria.
4. Health and fitness providers should employ qualified personnel to work in their industry.
5. Providers of health and fitness centres should operate within the scope of practice.
6. Certification should be part of prerequisite for employment in all health, exercise and fitness industry in Nigeria.

2. CONCLUSION

The writers will like to conclude by quoting Butler, (2012) who opined that “if exercise could be packed in a pill, it would be the single most widely prescribed and beneficial medicine in the world”. In view of the importance of exercise in promoting health and performance, there is need to certify and regulate the providers so that they prescribe and train their clients professionally.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

To make exercise physiology and fitness service providers relevant like other registered professions in Nigeria the following recommendations are made:

- The federal Government should set up a committee on Accreditation of exercise, fitness and health care providers in Nigeria. Members of the committee should comprise of representatives of NASSM and NAPER.SD. In addition, only accredited fitness centres should be allowed to provide fitness services and also, only certified fitness providers should be employed in all the fitness service industries.
- Departments of physical and health education and Human Kinetics in our various academic institutions should liaise with Nigerian Red cross or St John ambulance for certification of Physical and Health students in First aid and resuscitation.
- Nigerian Association of Sport Science and Medicine should affiliate with other health, sports, exercise and health allied associations in developed countries like USA, Britain, Canada, and Australia for certification and exchange of ideas.

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