

## Tag-Team Editorial

# Fitness Certification & the Case for Licensure

### **The Case for Licensure** by Maribeth Salge, MA, PT, ATC, CSCS, RCEP

The fitness industry is currently in a state of turmoil. In the certification realm, the new kids on the block are bashing the more established organizations. The big boys are fighting amongst themselves as to how best to prove themselves as the “gold standard”. Both sides have one goal in common, though—preventing government intervention.

Supposedly, certification is desirable because it means that the holder has proven himself/herself to be competent in basic knowledge, skills and abilities pertaining to the discipline. In the case of fitness certification, presumably the goal is to ensure that the practitioner is able to develop and implement exercise programs that will be both safe and effective for the consuming public.

If this is the basis on which the necessity for certification of fitness practitioners is founded, I find the organizational uproar over possible outside regulation of the industry hypocritical, to say the least. In the US, when public welfare is directly impacted by a particular group, such as health care providers, that group is required to be licensed to practice their profession. There are prerequisites to qualify for licensure, a licensing exam, statutes pertaining to practice and legal remedies for those who fail to follow the established standards of care.

If personal fitness training is to be considered a serious profession, there is a huge amount of work to be done. Public safety, not corporate greed, has to be the primary concern. It is not happening. Instead, the certifying bodies are getting themselves in a twist over possible licensure legislation, forming coalitions and holding meetings to protect their interests and piously declaring that self-policing, rather than oversight by an unbiased outside party, is the way to go.

Equally as guilty in this sham are some of the practitioners themselves. Everybody wants to be an overnight expert, getting all the glory, fame and fortune without bothering to learn the basics. As it currently stands, becoming a personal trainer requires nothing more than to state “I am a personal trainer”—no education, experience or proof of ability required, especially if one is blessed with good genes.

In my humble opinion, there will be no changes in the status quo for the fitness industry until there is government intervention and licensure is required for the practice of personal fitness training. Licensure will shake things up—there will be uniform standards for education, both didactic and experiential, establishment of a scope of practice, and laws to protect those who utilize the services of the license holders.

Having been through both an education and licensure system *and* certification by several of the heavy hitters, I have seen both sides of the licensure vs. certification issue. While neither is a perfect system, there are far more benefits than costs in the former. It would be a wonderful thing if everybody held themselves to higher standards. Problem is, unless it is an enforced improvement, there is no motivation for change, neither within the certification organizations, nor within the ranks of the practitioners themselves. In order to affect change, those who are to do the changing have to be convinced of the need to do so. Sometimes it only takes a carrot—other times, a stick.

## The Current State of Fitness Certification by Brian D. Johnston

Within every discipline... within every field... we have leaders who bear the title of 'representatives'. In exercise, those leaders include research scientists, a group that, for the most part, is unaware of the importance of valid measurement, such as accounting for exact positioning, stored energy, gravity, friction, and impact forces that occur during dynamic movement. As significant, they are unaware of the relevancy of individualism and genetic variation, as they randomize their subjects into groups in the hopes that everything statistically averages out in the end. As well, human motivation and other psychological phenomenon are ignored in the final results of nearly all performance-based studies.

Our next ambassadors of muscle, who represent sanity in the field of exercise science, are the magazine publishers. The ability to write an article does not mean the capacity to include rational thought. That is the first downfall of the fitness rags, from recommending 30 sets for biceps to suggesting that the latest supplement will help one gain 20 pounds of muscle due haste. In regard to the latter, magazine publishers (who also happen to own supplement companies) certainly bias their articles in the direction of having their readers believe the indispensable value of dietary supplements. This belief is perpetrated to the point that 'superstardom' appears impossible without them. This philosophy exists while glossing over the fact that most superstars do not take supplements apart from protein powders, taken likely for reasons of convenience than any other, and that anabolic steroids and growth hormone are the primary 'building blocks' for their success. Certainly supplements *can* have value with certain individuals: When I increase my exercise demands to the extreme, I have found select supplements to encourage recovery. The problem is that most advertisements and advertorials (i.e., supposed unbiased magazine articles) do not allude to any of this, and exercise, diet, and sport psychology information of value is lost within the shuffle.

Next, we have our personal trainers, who are stamped with approval by various companies to suggest that those representatives are 'competent' to stand freely and prescribe activities that serve to increase function (at best) or possibly cause injury (at worst). The term 'competent' means *having suitable or sufficient skill, knowledge, experience, etc., for some purpose; properly qualified* (Webster's Dictionary). The term 'qualified' can mean different things, including *having the qualities, accomplishments, etc., that fit a person for some function*, but also to mean *modified, limited, or restricted in some way* (Webster's). Keep this second definition in mind since it truly represents many within the group of whom I am speaking.

The act of certification is rather varied within this industry. Some courses are Internet based, whereby a simple test and a small fee apparently makes one competent to instruct and prescribe exercise. Other certifications involve weekend courses, whereby an individual memorizes information presented in a book, then completes some fill-in-the-blank and multiple-choice questions. Some exams are a bit more challenging, as they require students to write short essays based on memorized ideology and "inert" information of the certifying company. No need for practical experience! Those who do provide a practical learning component do an injustice since these companies fail to provide adequate tools or methods to establish any real value to the learning experience, i.e., no teaching of problem-solving skills together with a systematized and detailed method to record the process.

Some certification companies are more intense in their requirements, and it may take 5-6 months to obtain accreditation. Unfortunately, those more challenging certifications limit the learning experience to investigating biology, anatomy, physiology, and the like, and then the completion of modules that are akin to the weekend courses offered through other short-term certifications. The only difference is that there are more simple tests to complete without any sound, overall, integrated structure involved. This is not to suggest that there is no value in these generalized courses, but something very important (i.e., in-field application using logical methods) is missing.

First, let us look at the concept of certification, and the act of being certified. The term 'certified' means *having or proved by a certificate; guaranteed; reliably endorsed* (Webster's). In effect, the company providing the certificate testifies or vouches that the individual has the cognitive tools and is 'qualified' to act on a client's best behalf, i.e., the client's health and wellbeing. As with any industry, standards do vary, and this is why the saying "you get what you pay for" has been around for some time: Buy something cheap, and you get something cheap. Unfortunately, with exercise certification, many programs cost about the same, perhaps to reduce competition via a price war, but not all are created equal. In this regard, it is difficult to determine the standards of a company unless those standards are spelled out, since value is not related to cost in all instances. Now, how many certification companies go through the trouble to indicate exactly what will be learned beyond subject or title, and how those subjects will be learned? If the reader peruses the web sites, it will be noticed that not many practice this consumer service, nor do all offer learning materials in advance and without course registration.

Those reading this article likely know the quandary that the certification industry is in, whereby longevity and advertising of the company, and inter-gym philosophy and recognition of specific company names is more important than the actual standards supported by each company. More than once a student of the I.A.R.T. returned a certification course because his or her employer (or potential employer) did not recognize the I.A.R.T., and recommended the student obtain ACE or ISSA, for example. In other words, the employer was willing to accept the standards of a weekend course, but not a year of intensive study and practical application in an environment in which the individual will be working. In one instance, this was a Canadian gym, and the fact that the I.A.R.T. is a recognized education institute (in the field of fitness certification) with the Canadian federal government was of no relevance.

Yes, Virginia, there are many ignoramuses in this world, and the exercise industry is no exception, particularly when it comes to accrediting personal trainers. This is no exaggeration. Consider the following, an excerpt from the I.A.R.T. book *Muscleaneous: Flexing the Philosophical Muscle*.

*Reformation means to restore; improvement in form or quality; alteration to a better form; correction or removal of defects or errors; rebuilding. The term reformation is most notable historically as it pertains to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, although it can apply to any movement within any doctrine or industry with perceived low standards. The concept of 'reform' is different from change. Reform refers to an attempt to improve, whereas change means to alter what is fundamental. The fundamental principles of exercise are both sound and well accepted; however, how those principles are being applied need to experience serious reformation.*

*Now, if the desire to alter our standards are met with great energy by a great many people, it may result in a revolution, a term that refers to a change in movement, and that of a motion which returns to its starting point (to a better time).*

*Certainly a revolution is possible within the exercise industry, and has occurred at least twice to the author's knowledge. If we look at the history of exercise, particularly in the 1800s and early 1900s, the practice was far more clinical and accountable than it is today. Well-known practitioners of the science took meticulous notes and attempted to measure every aspect that was possible, from body measurements to cardiac functioning, as well as the nature and responses of various exercise modalities.*

*As bodybuilding became more popular, and those who published magazines could see potential in defrauding the public, much nonsense emerged only for the Nautilus revolution to take the world by storm. Arthur Jones, inventor of Nautilus, certainly was not the only vocal person to suggest that "less is better" and that brief, hard work holds the key to a healthy, strong body. However, because of his role in revolutionizing the gym industry via weight selectorized machines, he helped to entice and educate millions around the world about productive exercise.*

*Unfortunately, that revolution did not last long since far more many people were influenced by other doctrines, and the Nautilus (later to be called 'HIT') revolution waned as it stepped aside for Swiss ball and 'core stability' modalities, among other nonsense. Eventually, as people become educated on the facts, and as personal trainers become more responsive to client needs and realistic expectations, another revolution to reform the fitness industry to its once-past glory will establish.*

*For fitness professionals and those concerned about the profession, it is vital that we do revolt and reform so that fitness professional standards are raised prior to having people work in the field and command a wage of \$50 per hour/session or more. The irony is that funeral directors deal with the non-living, yet require far more schooling and in-field practical work before they are licensed, as compared to fitness professionals who deal with the health and wellbeing of those who are living.*

*Funeral directors (in Ontario, Canada) first complete a 40-hour observational work period, then apply to one of two colleges. If accepted, they undergo one year of schooling, followed by a year of in-field practical work, i.e., a work placement together with further studies. At the end of this period, students wrap things up with a two-week highly-intensive study period to recap all that has been taught and learned, together with a final practical examination of embalming and a government-based final exam. If the individual does not pass the embalming test the first time, a second test is provided under the supervision of a different teacher (in the event of a personality bias or clash). If failed the second time, the entire process must be repeated.*

*For personal trainers, by and large, the exam process is a weekend course, and if an in-home study course, it usually involves short essays of related information found within the study materials. The I.A.R.T. requires intense in-field work of a case study nature before becoming accredited, and even then the requirements are not unreasonable, particularly when compared to any professional study. (Because of my stance in this regard, and the onslaught of conflicting beliefs within this industry, I do consider myself an idealist.<sup>1</sup>)*

*Further, one of the strengths of some professions, including that of the funeral director, is the acquisition of experience as an apprentice, i.e., one who serves an employer in the exercise of some handicraft, art, trade, or profession, for a certain time, with a view to learn its details and duties, in which the employer is reciprocally bound to instruct him. Although an apprenticeship is possible within the exercise industry, since most new personal trainers work in this capacity to some degree when first hired by a fitness facility, on campus work is not practical at this time, and nor are some of the I.A.R.T. requirements. This is true, fundamentally and to reiterate, because standards and the industry's accepted infrastructural philosophy are so relaxed; standards so low that people can become 'qualified' (to use the term loosely) simply by writing a weekend exam or some other type of simplistic pedagogical procedure. Consequently, how does one reform the industry with a revolution when the vast majority of its people (i.e., personal trainers, gyms, strength coaches, and even university professors) have no interest to support it? Certainly formal education in some areas, such as neurophysiology, would clarify and expose the irrationality of 'core stability training', as well as the necessity to perform just the right amount of exercise in accordance to genetic trainability and stress physiology implications.*

*If we allow ourselves to get sucked into the hoopla of core stability, Swiss ball exercises, pliometrics, the need for explosive movement with athletes, and the endorsement of low standards within the fitness professional field as a whole, we will continue to see the catagenesis<sup>2</sup> of exercise science.*

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<sup>1</sup> An idealist is a person who cherishes or pursues high or noble principles, purposes, goals, etc.; a person who represents things as they might or should be rather than as they are. (Webster's)

<sup>2</sup> A biological term that refers to the retrogressive evolution of a species. (Webster's)

The comparison between funeral directors and personal trainers should provide cause for consideration as to what is occurring in this industry with our so-called fitness professionals. Hence, let us take a look at further definitions of the terms 'certify' and 'certified' (courtesy of Webster's). Besides vouching for the ability of an individual, the term certify also can mean *to declare legally insane and committable to a mental institution*. The term certified can mean *legally declared insane*. Hence, if it is not rational to expect an individual to work with the health and wellbeing of an individual after the completion of an Internet or weekend exam (an exam that does not assess the trainer's ability to put *principles into practice*), then the opposite must be true: Those who provide such low standards of testing are insane! The word 'insane' is not an overstatement, since one does not have to be completely deranged, but *deranged in some regard; foolish; irrational*. Just because a company offers certification in the area of exercise does not mean that the ideas are logical; those ideas could be senseless, negligent, of inferior standards, or of no bearing to reality or practicality. Moreover, there are certifications in many irrational areas of study, including reflexology, iridology, and other New Age and spiritual phenomenon. Why, then, should the exercise industry be excluded? The fact that any dimwit or highly intelligent individual, and everyone between can establish a certification company and issue a 'certificate' (since the concept of 'certificate' is not protected by law, unlike a diploma or degree), should make this obvious.<sup>3</sup>

Now, it should be pointed out that just because I envision how the exercise certification industry should operate and what should be taught does not make those opinions right or appropriate. However, I do base my concerns and beliefs on other disciplines and what is required to 'accredit' an individual in a particular field. Further, there are not many examples that are worse than that of the personal trainer industry, particularly in consideration of the fees that some trainers command. What other profession can a person take a weekend course (or no course at all) and charge at least \$25 per hour/session, with \$35 being the average (at the time of writing this position paper), and while being in command of the health and safety of others?

Moreover, credentials and knowledge extend beyond any course and the testing procedures involved, a reason why most certification companies require continuing education credits (and the investment of thousands of dollars over the years). The problem remains that most companies leave it up to each personal trainer to set higher standards of education *after the fact*, rather than those companies setting the highest standards possible *prior to* issuing a certificate of competency. Certainly education must continue after taking a course or going to school, a situation that is true of any quality profession including those of physicians and physiotherapists. Yet, the program that gives a person the 'thumbs up' to set off into the brave New World must provide sufficient preparation, knowledge, skills, and ethics. This means that there must be a high level of standards for both certified practitioner *and* the certifying body.

For a continuation of this article, and a discussion on the "politics" involved in the "governing" bodies (e.g., NOCA, IHRSA, FSC, etc.), refer to the full hardcover/CD version of *Synergy 2004*.

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<sup>3</sup> This is not to suggest that there are not topics (or ideas within topics) taught at the college and university level that are not equally irrational. Nearly twenty years ago I began my studies as a paralegal, a two-year college course. Although I would not say that it contained irrationality, although some teaching quality was questionable, what became apparent is that the real world of legal practice was much different than what was studied in school. This pattern is apparent in many disciplines, as relayed by acquaintances in other fields. It also is a pattern that is cliché in many professions and in the business world in particular, whereby the "real world experienced" mock the recently MBA graduated. This differentiation, between school and the real world, is the void that needs to be filled in many disciplines including the fitness profession. It is fine that a person learns about transverse planes and how motoneurons activate muscle fibers, but what can personal trainers actually do with that information when working with a client (as opposed to communicating with a peer on the subject)?