E. WHAT EVERY PERSONAL TRAINER NEEDS TO KNOW ... THAT CERTIFICATION MUST NOT BE AFRAID TO ASK by Paula Besson, M.Ed.

Personal Training is not a new concept. But what used to be a service available to and associated with only the rich and famous has swiftly made its way across many socio-economic and demographic barriers. In so doing it has provided new opportunities for many individuals working within the commercial fitness field. The significant growth in demand for personal trainers and the lack of any industry guidelines, however, has caused many questions to surface regarding “the training of the trainers” and the criteria for which they must be held accountable.

Personal trainers are generally hired to “help clients achieve a variety of specific fitness related goals. Many clients secretly wish that the trainer could just accomplish the goals for them. Some clients come with goals that are basically achievable and realistic and sometimes their goals are not. Some of the most common goals a trainer may hear from a potential client relate to losing weight, firming up, building muscles, flattening stomachs and diminishing the size of various and sundry body parts. Although these goals seem quite different, they really are not so different at all. All of these goals are, in fact, very much the same in that they are “cosmetic” in nature and say to the trainer, “Make me beautiful and I’ll give you money.”

Partly as a function of our media’s relentless seduction, Americans are obsessed with their physical appearance. And, although there is no real moral or ethical issue in regard to assisting a client in achieving cosmetic related goals, it gives rise to many questions about the scope of the personal trainer as professional and the responsibilities that accompany it. Many educators within the fitness profession strongly reject the cosmetic emphasis that pervades the industry, and see the growth in personal training as a new opportunity to change this emphasis which, in turn, may perhaps affect the dismal statistics on American morbidity and mortality. These same fitness educators suggest that given the positive relationship between regular exercise and health, the personal trainer may now be in a favorable position to make a significant difference in America’s health. The personal trainer must perform a function much greater than the “sculpting of biceps and buns.” Shifting the focus from cosmetics to health may, in fact, increase long term exercise compliance. Does anyone ever really end up looking like the skinny model tacked under the magnet on the refrigerator door?

The boom in personal training triggers many unanswered questions and gray areas, but the need for fitness guidance and counseling has never been clearer. Although there is enormous enthusiasm for exercise in America, available evidence indicates that between 66-80 percent of adult Americans do not exercise regularly, and only 10 percent of this population is likely to begin an exercise program within one year. Even more discouraging is the fact that of the 20-34 percent of those who do exercise regularly, one half are expected to drop out within 3-6 months. These statistics exist despite a multi-billion dollar fitness industry. It is clear that this not so pretty picture indicates that the health/fitness industry has failed to provide programs and educational services that get and keep Americans exercising.

No one within the fitness industry would dispute the need to accept the challenge that the statistics above provide. If the industry is to establish guidelines and define necessary areas of competence for the personal trainer, certification would seem to be a logical step. But what is the criterion for being an effective personal trainer? And what is the knowledge base required to prove proficiency? Although not without controversy, certification for aerobic instructors has certainly proven to improve the quality of aerobic classes in terms of safety and effectiveness. If we are to assume the same of certification for personal trainers, we must address three major bases of knowledge.

1. **Exercise Science:** Given that many Americans get a fair amount of their fitness information from places like the check-out line at the supermarket, they often come to the personal trainer with many misguided ideas and “belief systems.” The personal trainer will need, in many cases, to provide basic information regarding topics like the components of physical fitness as well as a variety of concepts relating to the principles of fitness conditioning.

2. **Education:** The act of giving information to a client does not assume that the client will adopt or adhere to the program that the trainer has assisted the client in setting up. Facilitating behavior change through behavior modification techniques is an essential objective if the client is to achieve and, more importantly, maintain his goals. The failure to study and address issues of human behavior and the mechanisms of learning is particularly evident in the commercial diet industry which boasts enormous yearly profits, yet over a five year period has a failure rate of 80-95 percent!
3. **Counseling:** Although the personal trainer is not, and should not attempt to operate as, a clinical psychological counselor the personal trainer is, in fact, a fitness counselor and would benefit from learning basic principles of counseling as well as situational leadership information.

The criteria for which Personal Training Certification basis itself will, in the final analysis, be the most powerful influence on how the industry defines the professional. Certification must dare to ask questions that make the industry ask questions of itself. Selecting the criteria for evaluation must stem from this basic question: Why, despite the efforts of so many, do Americans remain over-fat, innately sedentary, and at risk for many serious yet preventable diseases? Certification must not ask about the monkey see monkey do training technique that can be witnessed in many gyms across the country today. Nor should it ask questions about ways to look like movie star role models. And certainly certification cannot limit its definition of the personal trainer to only those working in weight rooms.

Finally, and with some irony, certification must ask for accountability and the skills to assist a client in the learning of self-responsibility. The truly successful personal trainer strives to facilitate health behavior change with full knowledge that his ultimate goal is to reach that point at which termination is eminent. Success for the personal trainer is, in fact, achieved when the client doesn't need a trainer anymore.