

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE FITNESS INDUSTRY TO THE PUBLIC HEALTH AGENDA IN THE UK

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Context

The British government wants to achieve an increase in regular moderate exercise including sport five times a week from 30% of the population in 2002 to 70% by 2020 (DCMS, 2002, CMO, 2004). It is planning a social marketing campaign to raise awareness and provoke interest in health, sport and fitness that will have a state budget of c£30m (the same as for safe driving and anti-smoking –Carter, 2005). Sport England has committed to seek a 1% annual increase in sport (SE, 2004), but there needs to be increases in other aspects of active lifestyles- walking, cycling, dancing and exercise. Over the past few years, the commercial sector of the fitness industry has shown a growing willingness to assist the Government with its health agenda. There are over 200,000 people working in the industry in 6,000 facilities across the UK who now receive excellent training. The Fitness Industry Association's (FIA) programmes, which involve both private and public sector operators, are specifically aimed at target areas of the population. Work has proceeded through a series of pilot schemes that are now ready to be rolled out nationwide.

FIA programmes

Inclusive fitness for disabled people

Ten private sector facilities have been involved in a very successful Inclusive Fitness Initiative (IFI) pilot, which should now be rolled out across the sector.

Adopt a School

This addresses the problem of obesity in 10 to 11 year-olds, and is linked to the Government's target to halt by 2010 the year-on-year rise of obesity in that age group whereby individual fitness centres are asked to link up with a local primary or secondary (?) school. Moreover, the FIA is currently developing a programme to address inactivity in teenage girls, in partnership with Sport England and the Music Factory. Pilots should begin in 2005-06.

Active at Work, Healthy for Life

FAWHL focuses on helping the country's relatively inactive workforce to introduce activity into their everyday routines, as well as signposting other aspects of a healthy lifestyle. The national programme for workplace activity has been made a responsibility of Sport England, a new area of implementation for that agency.

Individual private sector operators, like JJB Sports, are also playing an important role through planning the location of their fitness facilities to maximise accessibility for all social classes. JJB is currently investing £110m over the next 2 years to integrate 29 new health clubs into its existing retail sports goods stores. Such plans still need a sympathetic ear from planning authorities to succeed, despite the principle of increasing opportunities for health, particularly for disadvantaged people, sitting at the heart of the health agenda (Wilkinson, 2005).

All of the FIA's programmes involve an element of outreach – highly trained exercise professionals from private health and fitness clubs sharing their skills with the wider community, regardless of individuals' ability to pay for services. There are two key areas where this assistance can be developed

- GP exercise referral schemes (of which there are over 200 in Britain, where obese people or those at risk/suffering from the consequences of illness, or needing rehabilitation after medical care, are referred to (usually a public sports centre), but private fitness centres could equally share this task; and
- the new role of Health Trainers Both are central to achieving targets within the Government's health agenda.

Conclusions

The fitness industry has already dramatically increased its range of qualifications and continues to develop these so that instructors are trained to cope with sufferers of a range of long-term conditions,

such as Coronary Heart Disease (CHD), as well as able to identify the best methods to help those who are obese and unfit. Exercise professionals are able more and more to offer complete healthy lifestyle advice, including on diet. This is why, when the Government rolls out its Health Trainer package into its second phase – community trainers – exercise professionals already working in the fitness industry will be ideally placed to get involved. An ever-improving skill base and the growth of community-oriented programmes offer a bright future for the contribution of the commercial fitness industry to the Government's health agenda.

References

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