

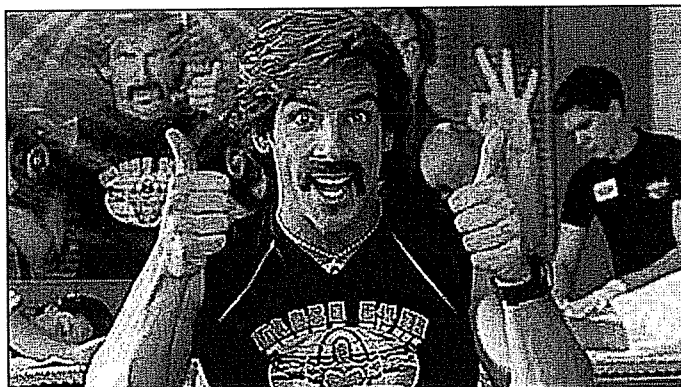
1 FEBRUARY 2010

Hands up if you're a fitness guru

SIOBHAN MOYLAN



Australia's obesity epidemic, along with a growing pressure to look fit and fab, has seen more people than ever rush for gym memberships and personal trainers in the hope of getting thin fast, or at the very least, fitter faster.



Faster still is the growing number of businesses popping up hoping to make money out of people who want a career in the fitness industry.

Google 'fitness industry/courses/correspondence/personal trainer' and you will be hit with a barrage of businesses offering accredited courses in personal training known as a Certificate III. Some even entice with rewards like free iPods at the end of an eight-week correspondence course. What next - a free set of steak knives if you sign up today, maybe a free abdominal cruncher?

In all likelihood at the end of the above-mentioned course students will find themselves working as a personal trainer. The problem is how much these courses are actually teaching trainers and are the certificates worth the paper they're written on?

Mark McGaw, former rugby league player and founder of The Institute of Sports Science, is a personal trainer who says the level of knowledge from students completing these eight week courses is dismal and can be detrimental to a clients overall health and safety. "I have people coming into my courses who have supposedly done a Certificate III, most can't even take your blood pressure. They're probably ticking the boxes of what VETAB has set out for them to do but they do it in a very minimal way which at the end of the day jeopardises the standard of trainer out there and the way people view our industry."

The Vocational Education and Training Accreditation Board (VETAB) has training courses for many industries and its job is to create standard training packages. Training outlets apply to VETAB to be able to deliver the training course, but not before becoming a registered training organisation (RTO).

Once these outlets receive RTO status they can administer VETAB's course in any way they like.

That is what's getting so many trainers in the industry hot under the collar and why they are asking how relevant these eight week courses really are if they are administered in such an ad-hoc manner.

The problem for a growing number of training institutions is that even though some of these RTOs are following the 'legal' guidelines, the guidelines are not strict enough. The result is that the standard of trainer out there differs so greatly from one institution to another.

Last year, my brother was keen to lose weight. He looked up a trainer on line and had a couple of sessions with him. The man weighed more than 100 kilograms and hadn't run for more than 15 years yet he found himself pounding around the lawns of the Domain in Sydney with a guy who didn't give him a proper fitness assessment beforehand.

And no, no blood pressure was taken. This could have resulted in major injury or something much worse.

My brother now has a well-qualified trainer who has crafted together a more suitable exercise regime to suit his personal needs. Results have come in a safe environment with people who have more than a 'cereal box' style qualification and a one-size-fits-all fitness program.

Most professional, experienced trainers will tell you a Certificate III doesn't guarantee the trainer you have chosen will be particularly competent. So why is it the qualification required to become a gym instructor?

With it, you can take initial health appraisals, write programs for gym members and supervise the gym floor. Certificate IV is the personal training qualification allowing you to train people one-on-one or in small groups.

You can work within the gym environment as well as outside at the park or beach. This qualification will allow you to work at any gym nationwide.

In this country you can't cut someone's hair or fix someone's toilet without having undergone an apprenticeship that takes years, but you can deal directly with a person's health.

In just eight short weeks you can get a qualification that will see you dealing with the foundations of someone's health.

Too many trainers know too little. Next time you find yourself being asked questions by your new trainer, make sure you throw a few back in their direction.

10 COMMENTS

Add your comment

- **Summer Nelson :**

16 Feb 2010 12:51:46pm

Well put Siobhan, and thank you for pointing out the comparison between the rookie trainer and the experienced one.

As an employer of Personal Trainers in the fitness industry, I see more & more green trainers who have been sold the dream of a rewarding career through the short courses you mentioned. This has drastically worsened with the unchecked growth of training providers more interested in selling courses than suitability.

As an industry we find many of these graduates lack the skills and aptitude required for meaningful employment, so they go into business for themselves! This is simply absurd.

I definitely agree Certificate IV is just the start, and it should be noted that many students who undertake proper study of their course material are very good, but in my mind, no qualification or degree is a substitute for experience.

The issue seems to stem from the fact that very few health clubs have gym instructor positions any more. This used to be the traditional "apprenticeship" you referred to. Once an instructor was experienced and good enough they then went on to be a PT. With virtually all clubs contracting or tenanting PT's now that vital step has been bypassed.

I do not agree with some of the other comments though, the fitness industry plays a vital role in supporting people at all levels to lead a healthier life. Many of our clients simply would not exercise or eat well, without the guidance and encouragement of their trusted professional personal trainer.

- **ian arnell :**

03 Feb 2010 5:07:17am

I reckon that outside of the bottled water business, the fitness industry would have to rank a close second as one of the great marketing cons of recent years.

Gees, it ain't rocket science. If you want to lose weight and become healthier, first get a check up from your local GP.

Then think about what you want. If you want to bulk up, go to gym, get them to work out a program based on your age, present fitness level and make a commitment to get there at least three times a week.

Commitment is difficult, and when it gets too hard you can find a dozen reasons to miss training. But as one guy I run with said to me, 'losers make excuses'.

If you're looking at just basic fitness, then start walking and build up to a run for a couple of ks and so on. If you hate running then grab hold of a good mountain bike, work out some circuits and get into it.

Of course all this is a waste of time unless you combine it with a diet. Cut out things like cheese, alcohol, junk food or chocolate.

Start eating more fruit, vegetables and if you work at it for a few weeks the new 'diet' becomes part of your routine and you don't think about it.

I changed my way of viewing exercise and food and after about three months saw a significant reduction in my blood pressure, cholesterol levels and started feeling great.

I ran my first twenty ks at 63 and while I'm still recovering from an accident a few months ago, hope to do my first marathon later in the year. When I'm training I alternate between running and cycling. And put in as many ks as I can.

As I said it ain't rocket science and you don't need to lash out hundreds for all the fancy gear. And don't get sucked into the boxing thing either. You don't need it. It's for the show ponies. Like the boot camp circus.

But spend as much as you can on a good pair of shoes, 'cause if you're going to be running a lot, it's a definite investment.

I tend to agree with Blunt Pencil when he questions why the fitness industry exists at all.

- **DannyS :**

01 Feb 2010 7:46:47pm

While I agree that there should be a basic minimum standard for people to be able to advertise themselves as Personal Trainers, there should also be a minimum standard for prospective clients to engage them. That is, be tested for a minimum amount of intelligence before being allowed to go out the front door and interact with society in ways that may eventually prove harmful.

For God's sake, who would be silly enough to start pounding on a jogging track while overweight and not have done any running for 15 years? Caveat emptor is a principle long established in British Common Law and here also, but it also presupposes a modicum of commonsense. Of course there are other various precepts enshrined in Common Law including the right to sue people for what amounts to modern day False Advertising. It could be a growth industry for Lawyers that is already growing for all I know. To really stretch the analogy, a person who wanders into a Used Car sales yard that is situated on the corner of an out of the way intersection that has 7 or 8 cars for sale at rock bottom prices is going to get a lemon. It's a given. We all know it, or we should all know it.

For years now I've seen what I assume to be Personal Trainers at the local park with 3, or sometimes 4, clients who are at completely different fitness levels being exhorted to perform the exact same tasks. The clients are always women and the P.T.'s are always men. I wonder why this is? I've seen women being made to run 50 metres, stop, run back, run again, back again, ad infinitum. Then they put on boxing gloves and they are supposed to rain lefts and rights onto the large pads the P.T. has on his hands. Some of the women appear to be almost anorexic and the muscle tone of their arms would make it doubtful that they could fight their way out of the proverbial paper bag, even a wet one. And this is after running, exercising their LEGS, not their arms. Why do they put up with this? I can only assume that there are too many people out there who have been hoodwinked into the whole idea of Personal Trainers as the new Lifestyle Miracle that will transform them into something that the mags and TV shows promise them is just around the corner.

- **Blunt pencil :**

01 Feb 2010 4:31:09pm

This is an industry that I just do not understand. I cannot see why it exists.

I can see a need for an elite athlete or a representative amateur sporting club but not the average Joe. To me the minimum qualification would be a Diploma, thats a proper Diploma that takes at least 1400 hours and not one of those private industry cornflakes packet things

For mine, part of the deal of health and fitness is an understanding of some of the principles and how they apply to you. Unless you have a medical condition, you really should be able to manage yourself in this area. It is not hard and exercise equipment costs less then gym membership.

On the broader issue of Private Accredited Courses, I did one 4 years ago and never, ever again. They love to TAFE bash but forget to look at their own woeful standards. Being handed the test along with the set of notes just after the here are the toilets speech is not my idea of learning.

Then again if Julia gets her way with the league tables then teaching the test will be standard practice everywhere so everything will be a cornflakes packet effort.

- **Cap'n :**

01 Feb 2010 3:00:53pm

The problem is, who is willing to pay \$100 per hour for a personal trainer? Because if someone puts themselves through a sports science degree, strength and fitness training courses, learns some psychology, plus all the ongoing education to stay abreast of the latest research and discoveries, why would they want to work for peanuts in a cheap suburban gym, or struggle to keep a PT business alive?

And even then, I could not count the number of times that myself or one of my colleagues had their program sabotaged when the client decided to either supplant or replace it with something they'd read in New Idea.

Training and experience costs money, which most people are unwilling to pay for. That's why you have 8-week course graduates, because they're the ones willing to work at the rates that most people are willing to pay.

- **Blunt pencil :**

01 Feb 2010 7:08:48pm

If someone takes the fitness advice from New Idea as gospel then they deserve what they get.

Looking at it from another viewpoint, I would think most people just need some sort of strength, flexibility and aerobic fitness coupled with a half decent diet.

Do you really need a personal trainer for that or just access to the local library, a pair of \$40 shoes, some old shorts and a shirt, and a bench with some weights of various sorts adding up to about 50Kg.

I once had someone come to me as a layman and ask where I got my running machine from as I said a ran a bit. My response was find yourself a piece of grass and some shoes. Stay off the bitumen because it is too hard on your joints. Dont pay much for the shoes as Mr Nike really could not care less about your footstrike and those nice clothes everyone seems to think they need do not help the process one iota.

Why does everyone think they need a machine to exercise on and some uninterested Cert 3 trainer watching their uncoordinated movements?

■ **Pyce :**

02 Feb 2010 10:29:21am

I think the biggest benefit most people get from personal trainers is motivation. Yes people CAN go out for a run themselves, or a swim or go to the gym.

But so often they don't.

Having a prescheduled appointment with a trainer makes it that much harder to find a reason to put it off for another day and for many people that's a big difference.

■ **Blunt pencil :**

02 Feb 2010 12:24:03pm

Yes, I could imagine that as a problem for some.

■ **Monica :**

01 Feb 2010 8:44:16pm

Exercising the brain isn't happening much either. I am charging \$20.00 per answer for anytime someone asks me a question, hehe, and I don't even know the answer. Senator Fielding asked me about Global Warming, sunspots I said, sunspots.

Maybe exercising your gluteus maximimus gives everyone a headache.

■ **pigsmayfly :**

05 Feb 2010 4:46:11pm

Trainers not worth their salt

Settle down everyone it doesn't take much to ruffle the feathers around here the story on personal trainers and their qualifications or lack of, has raised some salient points but it also needs to be kept in perspective.

Most people do not know how to eat for optimum performance and they certainly don't know how to train effectively. Hence the need for trained personal to guide them in the right direction, one of the problems is that the fitness industry is fundamentally about making money.

Fitness first one of the largest fitness chains is a business like any other they are, there to make money and riding closely on their back is the personal training industry. \$80 dollars an hour isn't chump change so it's easy to see the attraction for these short courses that also line the pockets of the fitness industry like fitness Australia.

I am a qualified (lapsed) fitness trainer but I don't train clients I don't like the way the industry is run i also believe that many PT are under qualified and give advice far beyond their knowledge base. So what should be done? For a start make PT part of a degree, make being a PT as any other professional person legitimate recognised qualifications.

We need the fitness industry to lift their game before they start trying to lift that of their clients.
Pigsmayfly