

Buyer beware: How well-trained is your trainer?



Knowledgeable trainers are certified by a recognized organization and stay up-to-date with the latest research.

By Jill Barker, Montreal Gazette; Postmedia News November 8, 2011

Photograph by: Don Healy, Regina Leader-Post, Postmedia News, Montreal Gazette; Postmedia News

Who knows whether Anna Kournikova, the Biggest Loser's latest celebrity trainer, actually has the credentials to whip the oversized into shape? Her online bio for the show gives few details about her certification, which unfortunately is common practice in the field of personal training.

There are plenty of trainers like Kournikova who have questionable qualifications. And even if a trainer has a certificate attesting to his status, he could easily be a graduate of a weekend boot camp or online exam that falls short of the kind of curriculum needed to train the average, and not so average, Canadian.

Despite the profession's failure to define a baseline level of theoretical and practical knowledge, personal trainers charge from \$40 to \$100 an hour. And unlike other professions who provide health-related services like nutritional counselling, there is no requirement for exercise trainers to obtain a university degree in their specific field before declaring themselves ready to solicit business.

Beyond the questionably qualified are knowledgeable trainers who excel at their jobs. Not only are they certified by an organization that demands more than a cheque and a passing grade on a multiple choice exam, they stay up to date with the latest research and attend conferences and workshops. But there's no easy way for the general public to discern between the two.

But that's not the only problem. Like those offering other services, trainers have a specific scope of practice that is based on their qualifications. Yet, according to a paper published in *The Journal of Exercise Physiology On-Line*, many trainers offer advice outside their level of expertise.

The Canadian Personal Trainer Survey polled the education, knowledge and level of service offered by personal trainers. From the information gathered on such topics as fitness assessment, exercise prescription, nutrition, weight management and general health and wellness, the authors were able to develop a picture of the profession.

A total of 268 surveys were collected and when tabulated, concluded that 53.9 per cent of trainers had a university degree, though not necessarily in an exercise or health-related discipline. Fifteen per cent held one personal training-specific certification, while the remaining 85 per cent held multiple certifications.

Interestingly, most of the trainers used similar fitness training and assessment tools, regardless of their qualifications. And all acknowledged the importance of nutritional tools like Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating and basic nutritional principles like reducing the amount of salt. Yet few discussed these topics with their clients. In fact, the survey determined there wasn't one other nutritional topic that all trainers either agreed or disagreed on, which suggests that the nutritional advice offered by trainers is wide-ranging and not necessarily evidence-based.

Also, despite a lack of specialized training, 53 per cent of trainers use some sort of therapeutic exercise in their practice, which is defined as exercises designed to improve such health-related problems as musculoskeletal injuries, obesity, cardiac abnormalities, diabetes and postural imbalances.

"At present, it appears that a large portion of fitness practitioners in Canada provide services outside of their scope of practice and level of training," said the study's authors, **Gregory Anderson, Brynne Elliott and Nate Woods**.

In other words, trainers should refrain from offering more than basic nutritional advice or trying to heal aches and pains without the appropriate training.

The basic services provided by qualified trainers include a personalized fitness assessment followed by the design of a fitness program based on individual goals. He or she should also be capable of modifying a fitness program based on injuries or specific medical conditions.

How well trainers do their jobs is based on their knowledge base. It's best to hire someone who attended a comprehensive training course and passed an exam that evaluates both the practical and theoretical components of personal training.

As for experience in the business, it's an adjunct to a good education, not a replacement for appropriate training. The same goes for athletic experience. Former athletes can make good trainers, but only if they have the professional credentials to back up time spent in the gym.

So do your homework before signing on with a trainer. All trainers and all certifications are not created equal.

Story ran in: Montreal Gazette (Nov 8th), Vancouver Sun (Dec 26th), Calgary Herald (Dec 27th)