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**Understanding Conflicts of Interest in Exercise Physiology**

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Exercise physiologists are responsible for managing influence and conflict of interest with professionalism.

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WANT TO address a topic that is a very important issue to me. It is the conflict of interest that exists when exercise physiologists take on the role of promoting sports supplements. I find the behavior is common among exercise physiologists who refer to themselves as sports nutritionists. I have written about this topic many times in the past (1-2), especially the teaching of sports nutrition by exercise physiologists who are paid consultants of sports supplement companies. My belief is simple: if the supplements work, then, it is cheating. If the supplements don’t work, it is quackery (i.e., promotion of products that do not work or have not been proven to work).

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| Conflict of interest has not been the subject of a great deal of press in exercise physiology. |

Conflict of interest has not been a subject of interest in exercise physiology. With a close look at sports nutrition and the topics covered in college classes, it shakes the trust and confidence that the public has in college teachers. If my thinking is hits home with the reader, why is it that exercise physiologists hardly ever write about the ethical concerns and conflict of interest when it comes to sport nutrition products? Shouldn’t there be some concern? I think so and yet, it is clear that a certain percent of exercise physiologists have either turned a blind eye to the conflict of interest or simply believe there isn’t anything wrong with doing so.

Did you know that some exercise physiologists support conferences designed to specifically promote sports supplements without revealing to those in attendance that they are actually spokesperson for different products. Their purpose is simple. The disguised talks by experts are designed to influence other exercise physiologists, athletes, coaches, strength and conditioning specialists, and students that using “x” supplement is necessary to win. Without question, conferences of this kind can have very negative consequences for student athletes. In particular, the teaching “that cheating is okay if not necessary” to win in athletics encourages the student athletes to believe that it is okay. Integrity is tossed out the door for the anticipated gain. Yet, over time, continuing to cheat with supplements and drugs has a very negative impact on one’s career. There is also the risk for legal penalties.

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| Serious conflicts of interest can and do have very negative consequences for athletes, but seldom ever for their teachers! |

Athletes who are caught cheating have their reputations seriously damaged and often they are subjected to serious penalties in their sports. It can’t be comforting and certainly not much fun to be informed by the authority that “you are suspended for 2 years from competition in your sport.” Not only does fault exist directly with the athletes, but also their teachers, coaches, and sports nutritionists who encouraged them to believe that it is okay to do whatever is believed necessary (i.e., win-at-all-costs). This is the central point in this brief article. The profession of exercise physiology suffers from the loss of society’s trust in exercise physiologists when they teach and/or promote the use of performance enhancing substances (supplements or otherwise).

In short, the role that exercise physiologists have in shaping society’s ideas and thinking regarding “exercise is medicine” is negatively impacted. As a college teacher who has taught sports nutrition for 20 or more years, I am concerned about how conflicting interests of hidden personal gain has a negative impact on students and especially student athletes. Why can’t the sports nutrition teacher simply teach what is believed to be good nutrition habits and practices for athletes? That is the bottom line. It is not only frustrating to think that what is common practice among sports nutrition teachers will continue unexamined, it is unethical.

We can all see the benefit of ethical thinking. Why not examine why it is a conflict of interest to teach that it is okay to use sports supplements? Why not encourage exercise physiologists to examine why it isn’t a good thing to promote supplements and drugs to increase the athlete’s chances of winning? Why not teach that cheating threatens integrity? This is true for the teacher as well as for the athlete. Intentionally teaching and/or promoting a supplement that is directly a function of “gifts” and money is wrong. Sure, it is easy to take money and even easier to turn a blind eye to the overwhelming evidence that exercise physiologists are as equally corrupted as members of most healthcare professions.

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| Many in society and our profession are not aware of the conflicting interests of hidden personal gain of sports nutrition teachers. |

The fact is that many medical doctors understand that they are being influenced by drug companies, and that they are often engaged in conflicts with drug and/or device representatives. Strangely enough, the PhD exercise physiologists are positive that they aren’t doing anything wrong. After all, their purpose in the academy is to do research. It is believed that there is nothing wrong with researching the effects of creatine on athletic performance. Those skeptical of this thinking understand that is the power of the teacher’s influence and the findings of their research that helps to support and promote sports supplement products. When you stop and think about it, why aren’t exercise physiologists thinking in accordance with their own code of ethics? If they were and if the profession had an influence on the behavior of exercise physiologists, they would not make unethical decisions (at least not as openly as they do).

Those who disagree with this thinking say, “If it isn’t illegal, then, it must be okay – right?” What is important here is simply that the absence of illegality does not make inserting “supplement commercials” into the sports nutrition lecture. For the record, in the exercise physiologist’s role as a healthcare professional, such behavior by a college teacher is not consistent with professionalism. In fact, when considering conflicts of interest, the ASEP leaders understand that in our role as healthcare professionals, our primary interests should be consistent with the elements of professionalism. That is, doing those things that are in the best care of their students. Such thinking is the cornerstone of professional development. It is the foundation of “right thinking” towards students and the profession. Thus, integrity requires them to be trustworthy, especially in regards to expectations of professionalism. Therefore, it is a conflict when secondary interests such as sports supplements threaten the integrity and the best interest of the students.

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| We can all see the potential benefit of associating with the sports supplement companies. After all, I am human, and I need money! |

Teachers can ethically work as a consultant to sports supplement companies, but the effort needs to be honest, not a sham, and it should be reviewed and approved by the academic institution to which the exercise physiologist is responsible. There should be specific guidelines regarding the integration and/or teaching of the same in the sports nutrition course. Failing to intentionally reveal the connection to the sports supplement companies, that is, intentionally not revealing a source of bias, clearly is failure in meeting the professionalism expectation of integrity and best care of the students.

The challenge is in identifying how to proceed. There is real jeopardy for bias in studies led by a sports supplement investor with a financial influence despite the exercise physiologist’s efforts and/or desire to be totally objective. If the sports supplement product comes to market, the exercise physiologist who is teaching sports nutrition should not receive royalty or recognition from any product used by athletes and respective institutions and sports. Once again, this thinking is consistent with the societal views of professionalism.

The ASEP leaders believe it is appropriate to face up to the challenges of how to meet professional obligations to their students, especially given the influences from the sports supplement industry. The fact that exercise physiologists are exposed to multiple influences does not mean that they are always engaged in conflicts of interest in academia. Although conflict of interest is likely to be viewed as new to exercise physiology, it isn’t new at all. It has been going on far too long in sports nutrition. Despite the hypocrisy, exercise physiologists can do better. Exercise physiology is a healthcare profession that requires “absolute” professionalism, not “relative” professionalism.

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| In understanding and managing conflict of interest in healthcare, exercise physiologists need to realize that they are continuously being influenced by the wrong people for the wrong reasons. |

Just because it comes across that some exercise physiologists think it isn’t an ethical problem to promote the use of sports supplements in their sports nutrition courses does not mean that it is the right thing to do. All of us are susceptible to many influences that we encounter on a daily basis, but just because we are exposed to the common use of performance enhancing substances doesn’t make it right. I suggest the following considerations to manage the exercise physiologist’s conflict of interest.

Avoid structuring your schedule around those who support the use of sports supplements. Avoid thinking that their way is the way, and that life is only a mix of power and influence. Step up to the plate, do your own thinking, and learn from your own experiences about ethics, cheating, sports, and professionalism. Expose yourself to new ideas and new information from journals that you do not normally read. This does not mean that you must turn your back to your friends and colleagues, but simply share with them the “new you.” This does not mean that you cannot accept grant money for supplement research, but keep it professional. The bottom line is that you are responsible for the best education possible for your students. Make a commitment that is unique in exercise physiology. Be that person students can look up to and admire. After all, integrity is important!

Think twice when it comes to the idea or notion that “big organizations” have it together. Those in charge are no different from the small organizations, except that they fear being pushed aside. It is more personal with them. So, learn to be skeptical about what they share in the big meetings and conferences. Look for what isn’t being said. Learn to read between the lines. The hallmark of straight thinking is as close to ethical thinking and goodwill as one can get. Look for that person and, then, listen and do what makes sense to maintain the integrity of professionalism.

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| Exercise physiologists must remember that in their role as healthcare professionals, their responsibility is to their clients. |

Trust is important. Unfortunately, many colleagues have forgotten this point. Respect is important. Look for both in your friends and colleagues. Keep the idea of doing the right things for the right reasons as being accountable and ethical. Do what is necessary to get beyond the dishonest and unethical colleagues. You have the right to be skeptical of behavior that is believed to be inappropriate. The idea that conflicts of interest aren’t a problem is simply wrong. It is the failure to think straight. That is why talking and writing about ethical principles represent the new 21st century way to think about exercise physiology. That is why getting a handle on turning a blind eye to the work of the ASEP leaders is senseless, demeaning, and harmful to everyone who has an interest in exercise physiology as a healthcare profession.

Why not start thinking as healthcare professionals and not just as a researcher? Why not read some articles on professional standards? Why not put aside some time to reflect on the importance of integrity? Why not read what the physical therapists are thinking about ethics, professionalism, and their 2020 vision? Why not become acquainted with the ideas that undergird accountability and conflicts of interest? Why not simply drop to your knees and say silently, “Finally, I get it. I understand that it is wrong to push sports supplements? I understand that I am not helping them to think through their concerns as athletes.” Why not read the ASEP code of ethics and professional standards of practice and, then, ask: “Is it right that I am paid to promote the bottom line of “x” company and its products?” Honestly, it isn’t that hard to be objective about the potential for conflicts and the opportunity to do something right on behalf of all exercise physiology and students who look up to their teachers.

Exercise physiologists, academic or otherwise, must stand up and spread the message across the profession that if exercise physiologists as sports nutritionists are engaged in conflicts of interest, they must disclose their connection with the sports supplement industry. Then, they must acknowledge that the idea itself has had a huge element of bias connected to past thinking, and that it is the association with such thinking itself that needs changing. Supporting a changed policy of how sports nutrition should be taught at the college level is a statement of both the individual and organizational accountability that is fundamental to the principles of professionalism.

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| In addition to a core of cognitive knowledge and hands-on laboratory skills, success in any profession requires a repertoire of professional behaviors. |

This understanding is the recognition that exercise physiologists, like all other individuals and professionals, are influenced by countless factors. Many of these factors are often overlook or misunderstood. Many are even believed to be appropriate. But, at least now, there is “one more article” to question the “deaf ear” approach to teaching sports nutrition. Remember the expression, “Hello America it is time to wake up and smell the roses?” Professionals must act as professionals. Exercise physiologists are professionals and, therefore, they must demonstrate their integrity to influence and stop their conflict of interest with the sports supplement industry. Students require more, deserve more, and should receive more to justify their tuition dollars.

Think about it. Are you a professional? This might seem a bit silly to ask, but we know that not everyone who looks or acts professional is a professional. Without question, education is important. So is experience, behavior, and a skill set; all are part of the professionalism process. There is still something missing, especially in face of the role of being an authority in the field. Being a professional is more than engaging in grant writing, accessing money, and publishing research to support the sports supplement industry. It is more than attending meetings and musing over the purchase of research equipment to publishing more papers about how to cheat in sports.

The road to professionalization starts from within each person. It is a way of thinking that is understood at the gut level. Most people know it when they see it. But, unfortunately, only a few students of sports nutrition ever get to actually see it. The body language of many sports nutritionists along with their writing of articles to support this supplement today and that supplement tomorrow is all too obvious. Where are their values? Where is it stated that it is okay to promote supplements among young children athletes? No where and, at the end the day, they don’t have the right to influence athletes to believe it is okay to do “whatever” to win. Creating a positive mental and physical athletic experience for the students is crucial. College teachers, sports nutritionists, and coaches must always act with the highest level of integrity. The needs of the student athletes must be cared for and nurtured.

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| Change is a process that involves the academic exercise physiologists as well as the students of exercise physiology. Sharing expectations is slow but necessary. |

Exercise physiologist or otherwise who teach athletes and others that it is okay to promote and use performance enhancers should be held accountable for their behavior? Professionalism requires that the instructors, coaches, researchers, and all others recognize behavior that helps to develop rather than tear down professionalism. This is true whether it is in the classroom, on the training field, or in the gym. Accepting responsibility and understanding the implications of one’s actions not only on the student athletes but also on sports are equally part of achieving professionalism.

This is where it is important to acknowledge that the needs of the athletes should come before that of the sports nutritionists, especially if they are paid consultants of the sports supplement industry. My point is that altruism is hardly recognizable among sports nutritionists. It has become all too accepted that it is okay to use this pill or that pill. Their concept of sports nutrition is all about finding the next supplement to win. This thinking must change so that a more collaborative and shared body of work can become the core of sports nutrition and the overall welfare of student athletes.

Integrity is at the core of building a profession. Exercise physiologists who are responsible for teaching sports nutrition must adhere to high ethical principles and professional standards. Integrity and honesty are paramount because the safety of the student athletes is at risk if there are complications. One simple complication is suspension from participating in sports. Where is the compassion and care for young athletes who grow up thinking it is okay do whatever to win, especially when they end up suspended from their sport for months or years? Where is the professional duty to do the right thing in the classroom? Where is the desire to share the true story of “what constitutes cheating in sports?” Where is the commitment to the profession and working to improve the quality of what is taught in sports nutrition? Where is the exercise physiologist’s responsibility to society? Where are the 21st century sports nutritionists who are willing to discuss these ideas with the older generation of sports nutritionists who value their status quo? Why isn’t the older generation of sports nutritionists held accountable for their mismanagement of the course content?

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| When exercise physiology students complete their academic degree program and begin their professional careers, educators expect them to have achieved a level of professional confidence and maturity. |

As a profession of exercise physiologists, we must do what we can to transform the old perceptions of the sports nutrition course as the “play ground” to promote sports supplements into one that provides meaningful nutritional concepts and outcomes for student athletes. Exercise physiology is evolving into a healthcare profession that strives for excellence in all of its academic courses. Our focus must be on how we can raise the bar of professional thinking and commitment to students, athletes, and society at large. If we fail to do this, then, the answer to the question: “Are we professionals?” is No. But, if we keep trying to do the right things for the right reasons, then, exercise physiologists will be recognized as healthcare professionals.

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