**Marketing Ethics, Sports Supplements, and Exercise Physiology**

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Tommy Boone, PhD, MPH, MAM, FASEP, EPC

Professor, Department of Exercise Physiology

The College of St. Scholastica

Duluth, MN 55811

You know, there’s that old saying: If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it. This thing called sports is broken and desperately needs to be fixed.

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| ***In many ways, athletics and exercise physiology need reform now, not later.*** |

Given the influx of sports supplements into athletics at all levels, there are ethical concerns about the marketing strategies used by the sports supplement industry? If they are determined to be unethical, the implications are huge (Boone, 2006). For example, it is common knowledge that athletes use supplements to gain an advantage over their competitors. In other words, the industry is promoting unethical behavior that encourages cheating in athletics. If that isn’t a big enough problem, what about the lack of emphasis on the athlete’s character and integrity (Boone, 2009)? When did that stop being important?

To view athletic competition as a win-at-all-cost engagement is to create an unsafe environment for athletes of all ages (Cohen & Kass, 2004; Quinn, 2005). Yet, most athletes have come to believe that it is appropriate to sacrifice one’s health to win. When athletes are harmed by bad practices, it raises many ethical issues (Boone, 2007). Why is such behavior allowed? Why is the behavior encouraged? Why should coaches be left alone to create a culture of questionable ethical practices? Is it because most people are willing to turn a deaf ear to a bad idea just to feel monetarily better?

To make matters worse, the profession of exercise physiology is part of the problem. In a nutshell, the sports nutrition course is part of the exercise physiology curriculum. The instructor is typically an exercise physiologist with an interest in sports nutrition. More often than not, the sports nutritionist participated in athletics (e.g., weight lifting or football). Either past athletic experiences with using supplements or the present necessity for grant money renders the instructor vulnerable to the sports supplement industry. The shared values between the instructor and the industry set the stage for the promotion of supplement products within the sports nutrition course. The key point is that the sports nutrition instructor becomes an unannounced paid consultant for the supplement industry.

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| ***Rising Insecurity.*** *The way the system works, even the youngest of children in sports will be on some kind of sports supplement or drug.* |

As college teachers, they have a tremendous influence over student-athletes. Their lectures distract the athletes from believing that discipline is sufficient to perform, thus encouraging even the most ethical athletes to use performance-enhancing substances (Boone, 2006; Lightsey & Attaway, 1992). Presumably, since persuasion isn’t perceived as coercion, some sports nutritionists believe they aren’t doing anything unethical or inappropriate. Others know all too well that their behavior is unethical, particularly since it is driven by consulting fees from the sports supplement industry.

To help prevent athletes from falling prey to the deceptive marketing techniques and fraudulent sports nutrition research findings (Boone, 2003), it is important that they understand the positive and negative aspects of certain marketing practices (Garner-Chambers 2009). Also, it is equally important for exercise physiologists to understand that promoting sports supplements to improve athletic performance is unethical for a healthcare profession (Health Professions Network, 2009).

**Ethics and Teaching**

While it is believed that exercise physiologists will be better received by society if they market themselves as ethical healthcare providers, there are two basic concerns. From what has already been stated, are exercise physiologists interested in the integrity of marketing? How about society as a whole? Are there major concerns about the ethics of sports supplements (Stephenson, 2008)? Isn’t it reasonable to conclude that student-athletes know the lectures on sports supplements aren’t reliable or trustworthy? Perhaps, the truth is athletes are poised to believe college professors. So, if athletes are told that a product will make them run faster, more often than not they will purchase the product with the expectation to run faster (Boone, 2002).

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| *My husband and I own and operate a small sports supplements store. This year we are promoting sports supplements to athletes of all ages. Why, you said? We had to face the fact that we needed to make more money!* |

Doing the right thing is critical to the integrity of marketing as it is to exercise physiology. Both are responsible for balancing the customer interests with business needs. Once a behavior is regarded as harmful, it must be discontinued because the basic value of safety is more important than the financial outcome (Boone, 2009). That is why analyzing ethical problems on the basis of the values (e.g., honesty, transparency, competitors, competition, research, and safety) which they infringe is fundamental to ethical marketing.

Causing harm to students by manipulating the sports nutrition content diminishes the integrity of the education process. Infringing on the students’ rights to an ethical education shows disrespect for students, thus destroying their basic human dignity. Such selective marketing of students in exercise physiology, given their interests in athletics, has proven profitable for the industry and the consultants. Regardless of the product offered or the market targeted, good marketing is practiced by setting and enforcing ethical guidelines (Boone, 2005).

That is why self-regulation not only helps, but permits change and adaptation to existing attitudes that are either deceptive or harmful. Unfortunately, only a few academic exercise physiologists seem to get this point. Most still believe that it is okay to teach student-athletes to use performance-enhancing substances. They don’t get the deception that is created by the sports supplement industry (Boone, 2009). Why, because they are hired by the industry to do their research. As such, then, many are willing to present data contrary to the actual research findings. They are in competition with their colleagues to increase profits and extract extra dollars from the consumer by using deceptive practices.

**Deceptive Marketing Practices**

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| ***Rising Concerns.*** *While we go about our business caring for our children, athletes are being buried in a sea of supplements and drugs. The truth is, if somebody doesn’t do something soon, athletics and our children will be changed forever.* |

If athletes believe performance-enhancing substances will improve their running time when there is no credible evidence to support the belief, the marketing practice by the supplement industry is deceptive (Boone, 2004; Reddiford, 1998). Promoting false and exaggerated claims about sports supplements, suppressing risks and side effects, and providing financial incentives to sports nutritionists are common ethical violations. This fact alone should cause athletes to be cautious of the products. But, strangely enough, athletes who are skeptical of a product usually buy it anyway, given the status of the sports nutritionists in athletics.

Anabolic-androgenic steroids represent such a product. As synthetic analogues of testosterone, they have widespread physiologic effects (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2009). As performance-enhancers, they not only promote the growth and strength of skeletal muscle, they enhance the athlete’s performance (Steroid Sources, 2009). There are many deceptive marketing practices in regards to these products, which raises the question: Is marketing an ethical profession, given that these products are knowingly problematic in athletics?

The pharmaceutical industry is equally aggressive in its marketing practices. There is a mixture of corrupt physicians, underhanded payment schemes and, to some degree, a disregard for patient health. As an example,

according to Adams (2004), one of the largest drug companies in the world, Schering-Plough, has been bribing physicians to prescribe drugs and operate sham clinical trials. Without question, underhanded payment schemes and sham clinical trials represent physician behavior that isn’t just deceptive but unethical as well. At the core of the manipulative behavior is the management process of appearing to satisfy the patient while making a profit.

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| ***Athletics without performance-enhancing substances will be good for athletes of all ages. If we can stop the runaway sports supplement industry, athletics can once again be about character and integrity.*** |

When it comes to marketing, the objective is to find the right market mix of price, place, product, and promotion to sell sports supplements (Clearlybusiness, 2009). The ethical question is this: Is the priority of business, as facilitated by a marketing mix, always more important than the human quality of society? The answer must be that it is not right to argue the end justifies the means. Moreover, it is never right to do a little evil to achieve a greater good. As to whether the marketing mix for creatine monohydrate is ethical, the decision is still out.

The professional practice of marketing, medicine, and exercise physiology cannot be credible without accountability. Every profession must have at its core integrity, compassion, excellence, and altruism. Medicine is a profession! Why, then is the commercialization of medicine over the edge? This point was raised in an Editorial (CMAJ, 2006) that concluded notonly is the privileged knowledge the physicians once possessedno longer exclusive, but the integrity of thatknowledge is being corroded by their involvement in commercial interests. Are exercise physiologists making the same mistake? If so, shouldn’t exercise physiologists separate themselves from receiving gifts of any kind from marketers?

Whether it is marketing a product, teaching a sports nutrition course, or giving a patient a prescription drug, it all comes down to being ethically responsible. It is the Holy Grail of doing the right thing for the right reason. If an advertisement is offensive, it should be pulled. If an exercise physiologist is promoting sports supplements, the act of doing so should be called into question. If physicians write brand name drug prescriptions when they could prescribe a less expensive generic drug, the behavior should be questioned (Zajac, 2009).

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| ***Imagine!*** *It is really hard to believe that exercise physiologists haven’t thrown up their hands and said “Enough is enough with the drugs and supplements.”* |

Marketing, teaching, and medicine are responsible to a code of conduct. Being socially responsible is the key to the ethical delivery of products, knowledge, and healthcare, respectively. No doubt that is why the GlaxoSmithKline Company (2009) developed a marketing code and policy along with training for sales representatives to help make sure they behave ethically. Company policy prohibits kickbacks or bribery of the doctors. All products must be scientifically valid, balanced, and objective.

Just as the members of the American Marketing Association (2009) are committed to honesty, responsibility, fairness, respect, transparency, and citizenship, the ASEP members are committed to ethical professional conduct. That is why all board certified exercise physiologists must make every effort to ensure that their decisions and/or recommendations serve the best interest of their clients.

**Target Marketing and Ethical Questions**

Although target marketing isn’t illegal, there are instances where the advertising of cigarettes and alcohol on television and billboards near public schools has raised public concern (Clay, 2000). Targeting children and teenagers with tailored messages and products is at the core of marketing because the marketing mix is uniquely tailored to produce years of profit. The question is this: Is the targeting of public school children ethical? Given the objective of the advertisements to persuade the targeted market to purchase cigarettes and alcohol, it isn’t ethical.

What about McDonald’s marketing strategy to target children (Spurlock, 2005)? The television advertisements, free toys, Happy Meals, and the idea of a joyful family gathering represent a very persuasive reason to eat at McDonald’s. By providing play areas where the children can interact with each other and their parents, McDonald’s is building a relationship with its customers. There is also the Ronald McDonald House and helping children. Okay, what could be wrong with this picture? Perhaps, it is fair to say that it isn’t all wrong. McDonald’s has the same right as other businesses to make a profit, but that itself does not dismiss concerns about the consumption of unhealthy food and the public relations tactics? In short, is the market mix ethical?

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| *It’s Up to You.*  ***Every good idea starts with one person!*** |

If a huge number of calories from unhealthy food along with inactivity can lead to childhood obesity and health problems, why would the market mix be considered ethical? Is the promotion of hamburgers for profit without constraint? Are the excess calories any less harmful to young children than cigarettes? The fact is both are bad unless consumed in moderation, but moderation isn’t good for profits. So McDonald’s and tobacco companies aren’t likely to argue for less than maximum consumption per individual. It is this lack of attention to the consumers’ healthcare and the related market mix that raises the ethical concerns (Center for Ethics and Business, 2009).

Who is responsible for target marketing that is unethical? If it isn’t the public relations practitioner, the agency or the company, who is it? Is it the government’s fault? Perhaps, it is the public’s responsibility to say “no” to products marketed to vulnerable groups, including children and athletes? What about the professional agencies and organizations? Should these groups be held accountable as well? Should they be allowed to operate if the products knowingly cause harm?

For certain, there is a perceived vulnerability within athletics. The idea that it is ethical to advertise drugs, supplements, and other performance-enhancing substances to enhance athletic ability should be questioned by teachers, researchers, coaches, trainers, athletes, and parents. Instead of allowing marketers to view sports as a pool of individuals with dollars to spend on their products, exercise physiologists (in particular) should talk about character and ethical thinking in sports nutrition courses (Boone, 2003). After all, cheating in sports destroys integrity.

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| *The* ***Do-Nothing*** *approach is the loser’s mind-set of saying, “It’s not my problem.” What should be obvious is this: The athletes are our children.* |

When thinking about marketing ethics, it is important that misinformation isn’t shared or promoted in any way that helps to develop beliefs that lack credibility. To do so is to invite bad behavior, especially for those who would kill for a competitive edge or for a moment of glory. That is why exercise physiologists must take the ethical road even if it means going without grant money or supporting an idea that isn’t popular but right or less profound but safe for athletes (Boone, 2006). To do less than this in the sports nutrition course is to encourage fraudulent ideas and unethical behaviors.

The exercise physiologists’ practice depends upon understanding their Code of Ethics (American Society of Exercise Physiologists, 2009) and what it means to the professionalization of exercise physiology. It symbolizes professionalism and, therefore, differentiates exercise physiologists from other groups of individuals, occupations, and technical careers of which many are defined by weekend warrior certifications. The Code speaks to leadership and responsibility for self-regulation, particularly the restriction of advertising or the promotion of an idea outside of the context of demonstrated scientific findings. In this way, it is anticipated that the exercise physiologist as a healthcare provider will be as Edge and Groves (1994) said, “…a practitioner who will not pursue his own interests at the expense of the client…” (p. 186).

Clearly, much work remains to be done. Imagine how many times student-athletes have read an article with phrases such as: “may help run faster,” “may explain why he won,” “may result in bigger muscles,” or “may hasten the athlete’s recovery.” The phrases are actually advertisements! Each one is intended to promote a product. The wording itself is a declared science, not an actual science. The problem is that athletes don’t know that much of the sports supplement science is conjecture. Deception within the context of good science is not a new idea.

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| *The economics of the sports supplements industry cannot be allowed to take precedent over the athlete’s character.* |

Lightsey (2003), who is a member of the Nutrition and Food Science Advisors Board of Quackwatch (Barrett, 2003), identified four deceptive marketing tactics for performance-enhancing substances: (a) taking published research out of context; (b) claiming products are university tested when no research has been done or false statements were made regarding research; (c) using unauthorized endorsements by professional organizations; and (d) referencing research inappropriately. Each tactic is unethical and cannot be condoned by professionals.

Exercise physiologists are responsible for spreading the message that performance-enhancing substances are not okay just because they may not be illegal. The fact is every athlete can’t be a winner and that is okay. Not every person can be big or fast, and that is okay, too. Marketing strategies that encourage bypassing the rules represent the wrong way to think. Playing within the rules is important, but also important is what the athlete comes away with after the sporting days are over. That “special something” or, if you will, the athlete’s integrity and strength of character are more important than the marketing deception that associates with the business of cheating (Boone, 2009).

**Ethics and Conflict of Interest**

The professor’s responsibility is awesome and unmatched by many professions. Teaching is not for everyone and, yet every person thinks he or she can teach. Being an excellent teacher is a constant challenge, especially when asked to question presuppositions that many colleagues take for granted. This is true regardless of whether it is a teacher in management responsible for the marketing ethics course or the exercise physiologists responsible for the electrocardiography course. Both teachers are responsible for setting the ethical example in terms of attitudes and values. Both are responsible for dealing with such statements as, “Why bother with ethics. Everyone is doing it. Get real. Who cares?” Or, “Who are we hurting? Athletes want this stuff.”

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| ***The gospel coaches should preach is “integrity and character” and not “win-at-all-cost.”*** |

Is it right for a teacher to promote an idea or a product without serious consideration of ethical issues? If so, why is that? Who is at fault for not holding the teacher accountable for the behavior? Similarly, is it okay to cheat in sports because everybody else is doing it? Is the supplement-induced competitive edge more important than integrity (Ivry, 2003)? Strangely enough, many marketers, athletes, researchers, coaches, medical doctors, and teachers have given in to the new paradigm where the “magic pill” is in and ethical standards are out. The win-at-all-cost mentality, noted by the recent arrest of business men who stole from their clients is a problem that needs immediate ethical discussion and critical reflection.

Barr (2002) said it best: “Cheating has evolved into epidemic proportions because we want shortcuts…” (p. 1). Similarly, others have concluded that the financial incentives, which are shaped by commercialization, professionalization, and an increasing importance of medals, have unhinged the basic ethical principles of fair play and equal opportunity (Striefel, Vollkommer, & Sickout, 2002). It is shocking that grant writers who get money from supplement industry companies cannot see the conflict of interest.  This is not a new idea by any means.

Hwang and Has (2000) pointed out that the Federal Advisory Committee Act requires the committee members to not be inappropriately influenced by any special interest because many committees are stacked with academics whose ties to industry raised the question of a conflict of interest.  Clearly, the potential for conflicts of interest, if not carefully handled, can undermine the integrity of the development of the members of any emerging or established profession.

Exercise physiologists must adopt and actively promote fair standards of ethical conduct to ensure that they will not be involved in conflicts of interest.  Perhaps, a beginning point is to establish an advisory committee within the ASEP organization?  Members could represent the latest thinking about the ASEP Code of Ethics and exercise physiologists’ interested in promoting sports supplements in their sports nutrition courses.  The committee could be the first-ever attempt by exercise physiology professionals to systematically and purposely investigate the role of exercise physiology sports supplement research in effort to avoid unethical behavior.

**Marketing, Sports, and Children**

Even now, the 40 to 140 million Internet users per year have changed the way business is done. The get-rich-quick scams and advertising tricks are full of deceptive practices and statements. Disguised advertising in the form of a research article is part of the commercialization of many products. Place-based advertising is not new.  Examples include ads before movies, on buses and trains in cities, airports, videos, gas pumps, and in doctors’ offices (Gordon, 2006).  Hardly anything will stop the companies from advertising their products.

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| ***If we cling to what sports as we know it today, the future of what sports can be is closed to us.*** |

Another form of advertising is product placement.  The industry pays to have a product included in the professor’s research agenda.  As a result, many publications are little more than a sales pitch rather than objective science.  The commercial use of academic classrooms and journals should be forbidden since it undermines the students’ education.  Most of the sports supplement articles are either 100% in favor of supplements or they are written with the language of weasel words that implies a benefit.  Therefore, it is a rather easy step for athletes to give in to an industry that is corrupted by companies that market worthless and sometimes deadly products.

The commercialization of childhood sports has been going on for decades, and it is going to get worse.  The supporters of the supplement industry realize that if they can get the children hooked on supplements, they will do an end-run around the parents to get the supplements.  Most parents do not know that if their children are left to the influence of the supplement culture, it is simply a matter of time before they become users. The industry is betting on this outcome.  In fact, between the ages of 4 and 12, children spend billions in purchases.  Older kids spend even more (Hymowitz, 2005). Money is not the issue.

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| ***The idea of attracting cradle-to-grave supplement loyalty is a foothold that simply does not make sense.*** |

The corporate CEOs and marketers loyal to the supplement industry understand these points very well.  They also get that children have money to spend and, therefore, this alone will lead to intense competition among marketers.  Since there are very few obstacles to stop the CEOs and marketers from luring kids, teenagers, and college students to use supplements, it will not be long before every athlete, regardless of age, will be taking several supplements with the idea that they will run faster and be winners!

That is also why the marketers are going to do their best to put their supplement logos in the face of every child and student possible.  They know that children and students are the target audience.  Children are naïve and easily influenced.  They can be manipulated and transformed into supplement users.  Without question, the CEOs and marketers will be unbelievably successful if something is not done to stop them.  The irony is that few parents, professionals, including college teachers, seem to fully grasp the larger societal and ethical dynamics of the powerful influence of the marketers.

The idea of attracting cradle-to-grave supplement loyalty is a foothold that simply does not make sense. It should not be allowed to continue, but the marketers are already marketing thong underwear and lip gloss to eight-year-old girls. People in the advertising business simply do not get it or they don't care. Remember, it is all about the bottom line.  They don't believe the problem exists with them.  If there is one, their argument is that the parents are the problem.  Parents are buying their children belly shirts and R-rated video games (Hymowitz, 2005).

Parents even believe that the growing commercialization of sports supplements means the supplements are safe and, perhaps, even necessary.  This commercial imperative, triggered by the industry, is a problematic part of athletics as is the lack of any ethical discussion about supplements.  It has polluted and transformed the idea of athletics as a means to building character. Instead, children and athletics have become the epicenter of money! Whether it is DVD players, computers, iPods, cell phones, $150 sneakers, or designer clothes, children spend an estimated $30 billion a year in direct purchases (New American Dream, 2005).

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| *There is no failure as long as we continue trying to do something about the negative effects that drugs and sports supplements are having on our athletes and sports.* |

Making matters worse is the fact that the pages of fitness magazines are smothered in supplement advertisements.  Many fitness facilities could double as paid advertisements for the sports supplement industry.  Athletes who use supplements are walking, talking, and wearing industry logos.  The industry has made huge inroads into the American fitness culture in general and, unfortunately, the sports nutrition course has become a paid advertisement.  As paid consultants, professors are researching supplements via theses and dissertations that are then published in industry sponsored journals. The published articles are used in the sports nutrition course to further market and legitimize specific supplements.

They have sidestepped the gatekeepers (i.e., professionals) and gone directly to athletes and anyone else willing to listen.  The result is that many young athletes do not have a chance to think straight about supplements (Boone, 2005). They grow up failing to understand that there are two primary reasons to participate in sports. The first one is to build character and the second is to build the athlete’s physical abilities to play well. It is despicable when these two objectives are perverted in the name of getting an edge and/or win-at-all-cost.

It is a matter of time before the marketers, in all forms and titles will promote performance-enhancement through gene doping.  Why, because it is all about the money! Sports supplements represent a multi-billion-dollar industry in the United States.  Supplement use is widespread.  In fact, according to Mazur (2001), almost one-third of a sample of 21,225 college student-athletes was currently using supplements in 2001.  But, as if that wasn’t enough, listen to what Alexander (2006) said, “Doping authorities met with genetic scientists to ask if athletes and their handlers would soon be altering their very genomes in an effort to soup up their performance” (p. 1). There isn’t any question that the age of the genetically-enhanced athlete will be reality in the near future (Sweeney, 2004)

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| ***The culture of professionalism in exercise physiology isn’t well developed. It takes courage to think differently!*** |

The supplement marketers are not concerned with the integrity of sports or the health of athletes.  Both could be irreparably changed if exercise physiologists and others (e.g., parents, coaches, and trainers in particular) do not argue that it is unethical to market supplement products that undermine the integrity of athletes. In fact, it is already a problem in professional cycling and swimming.  Regarding the latter, bodysuits alter the swimmer’s performance times, thus increasing the efficiency of muscular system above that of the natural training effect.  As a result, unless the suits are banned, there is no way to keep swimming contests fair.  It should not be said that one athlete is better another simply because of a swim suit.

The idea that it is ethical to promote supplements while also promoting a behavior that is okay to cheat in sports is senseless (Hoffman, 2005).  This is why everyone involved in athletics must take a stand to stop unethical marketing practices. Of course there is nothing wrong with the athlete’s desire to be fast or strong. Similarly, there is nothing wrong with a student making an “A” on a test. But, if the student cheated, then it is wrong. Neither point is complicated, yet in athletics it is somehow justified that cheating is okay. It isn’t okay (Boone, 2008).

**Marketing, Sports, and the Future**

Unless ethical thinking isn’t woven into the very fabric of athletics, the chemical cocktails that will be marketed in the future will make what is common today look like aspirins. University labs around the world will undoubtedly have “certified sports supplement specialist” who will be paid by the industry to promote their products. Exercise physiologists with an interest in sports nutrition will be talented, forward-looking marketers with new cars, clothes, and jewelry. They will be investors not researchers in the true sense of the word. As the most vocal faculty members in the department, they will be acknowledged as experts in the field. Their research will be used to market the industry’s products.

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| ***Can You Believe It?*** *Sports nutritionists have become the recognized force behind the commercialization of exercise physiology.* |

Sports nutritionists will become a recognized force behind the commercialization of exercise physiology. Discoveries in new product development will be attributed to them. The focus on increasing the exercise physiology body of knowledge will change from its traditional views to the profit motive. The expense of new equipment will only increase. Hence, the laboratories that do the sports supplement research will have stock in the several different companies within the industry. Directors will receive money for their supervision of the industry’s dollars and the purchase of equipment to do more of their work.

The question of integrity and the role of professionalism will take a back seat to big laboratories. Students will come to believe that it is okay to cheat a little on their thesis statistics. Faculty will sit in first class plane seats flying from one place to another rather than teaching their students and meeting at Black Woods. Book publishing companies that partner with the industry’s dollar will publish biased books, much like today’s advertisements. The partnership will effectively market products for the industry. Traditional beliefs and values about academics, teaching, and research will change along with the power of money and influence. Academics will take on the air of traditional business ideals.

The tendency to support the industry will be so strong that the ethical advancement of exercise physiology research will be severely affected. Rather than publishing new ideas and statistically driven data and findings, decisions will be based first on how it affects the industry and, then whether it has academic value. Non-positive results will be pushed under the rug or retested until the desired results are found that favor the supplement industry and the CEOs strategic initiatives. Even today this is not a hypothetical view. Will it get worse in 2020 and especially in 2030 if something isn’t done about it soon? You bet it will. It is already moving that way with great speed.

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