The Rightness andWrongness of Sports Supplement Pushers
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Ethical safeguards are defined here as deliberate measures and programs used by
an organization to prevent unethical behavior and to promote ethical practices –
mechanisms, structure, or pronouncements intended to encourage, guide, and
regulate ethical behavior.

-- von der Embse and colleagues [1]

The truth is that most people who teach sports nutrition are exercise physiologists.
Another truth is that “sports nutrition is for sale.” A third truth is that neither
exercise physiologists nor the business of sport is excused from the ethical issues
confronting each [2]. And yet, however important it is to deal with morality and the
standards of morality individuals should follow, very few articles have addressed the
rightness and wrongness of the sports supplement pushers.

Exercise physiologists are responsible for addressing ethical questions such as those
pertaining to professionalism and professional development unique to the profession of
exercise physiology. Aren’t they? Or, is it true that exercise physiologists have the right
to do as they please? The obvious short answer (or at least it should be) is that exercise
physiologists are not above ethical issues facing their profession.

That being said, what obligations do exercise physiologists have to their students?
One ethical decision the sports nutritionist faces is whether he or she is teaching sound
nutritional information. When this done, the sports nutritionist can have a positive
impact on athletics. When it isn’t done, the teaching of sports supplements as
performance enhancers becomes an ethical problem. Most notably, there is an increase in the consumption of sports supplements. The underlying question here is who is failing athletics, the education of students, and the profession of exercise physiology? The answer to that question speaks to the failure of exercise physiologists in general.

The bottom line question remains: Who profits from teaching sports supplements rather than sports nutrition? The answer is the sports nutrition teachers, especially if they are consultants for the sports supplement industry. In addition to regular payments from the industry, they receive grant money to promote the sale of more supplements. Thus, the question becomes for exercise physiologists, “Is this an ethical stance to take?” Is it ethical to “use students in an educational setting to promote the sports supplement industry?”

Whether one sides with exercise physiologists who support the sports supplement industry or exercise physiologists who aren’t supporters of performance enhancement supplements, there is the question of fairness involved in the educational setting. What constitutes the right of college teachers to use the classroom to benefit financially? Just how much control are teachers allowed to have over the teaching process? Also, where does the phrase “in the best interest of students” enter into the discussion?

Although the position of teachers versus students must be respected, the basic principles of rightness and wrongness when dealing with students must be addressed. Currently, as incredible as it might be for other healthcare professionals, there is little discussion in the profession of exercise physiology about ethical issues. And yet, aren’t exercise physiologists responsible for dealing with unethical behavior? Aren’t they responsible for educating members of the profession about this problem?

Sports nutrition is regarded as one of the core courses in exercise physiology and related academic majors (such as exercise science, kinesiology, and human performance). Unfortunately, the teaching of sports supplements has been part of the traditional sports nutrition course taught by exercise physiologists. This thinking isn’t new. It is a growing problem within the profession of exercise physiology and intercollegiate athletics.

The “win at all costs” attitude is extremely dangerous. Athletes are known to take multiple supplements, including steroids. This problem is compounded because of lack of proper regulation of substances that are not banned or considered illegal. Academic
exercise physiologists have been slow to deal with the ethical issues that surround performance enhancement substances. Why the ethical issues of cheating are simply ignored by exercise physiologists is partly selfish and partly a function of the failed sports medicine rhetoric.

Violations include improper academic thinking when it comes to the teachers’ responsibility: (a) to teach critical thinking in sports nutrition; (b) to deal with the lack of academic identification of “what is” appropriate behavior by sports nutritionists; (c) to address the failure to demonstrate professional conduct; and (c) to address the unethical conduct by exercise physiologists. The win at all costs attitude by college professors also dominates the teaching profession. The financial rewards and status are “big time” outcomes.

After a while, even though a handful of exercise physiologists may feel at odds with the rightness or wrongness of their behavior, it becomes easy to turn a blind eye to promoting performance enhancement substances. College teachers, students, and athletes feel pressure from many directions to succeed. And yet, shouldn’t they also feel the pressure of professionalization? Shouldn’t they understand that there is a ethical dilemma when they are acknowledged paid consultant of a sports supplement product while teaching sports nutrition?

Unfortunately, exercise physiologists have not made a commitment to addressing these questions just raised. Even when managers and other key figures from the sports supplement industry offer inducements such as travel to meetings, paid hotel rooms, and the purchase of laboratory equipment in order to get them to promote their products, the commercialization of exercise physiology (and sports nutrition) isn’t a good thing. As has been pointed out by others, there is good reason to believe that such behavior violates the spirit of sports [3].

While the majority of literature concerning ethics and sports has focused on ethical issues confronting athletes, as oppose to sports nutrition instructors. Only a few exercise physiologists have specifically addressed the ethical issues that confront sports nutritionists. Because of the complexity and work that goes along with title, credibility, and respect that associates with a profession, it would seem more than obvious that
exercise physiologists would get a handle on the ethical issues faced by the profession of exercise physiology.

Several recommendations for ethical decision-making that might help encourage social and professional responsibility for supporting professional and ethical development of exercise physiologists are:

1. Recognize that there is a problem with exercise physiologists who promote performance enhancement substances.

2. Recognize that ASEP exercise physiologists are responsible to their own code of ethics that is highly relevant to the profession of exercise physiology.

3. Find the time to examine one’s own personal and professional values and beliefs regarding the profession as a teacher, research, businessman or woman in the application of exercise as medicine.

4. Consult with other healthcare professionals to determine the rightness and wrongness of personal and professional behavior when interacting with students, colleagues, associates, and clients.

5. Look for opportunities to write, research, publish, and/or present papers about the importance of an ethical decision-making model for exercise physiologists.

6. Share a short declaration of the ASEP key values that the organization and its members are expected to support.

7. Recognize that ethics should be viewed as a constellation of behavior standards that guide exercise physiologists’ actions beneficially.
References

