Integrating Fitness Programs Into a Chiropractic Practice

By Jasper Sidhu, BSc, DC

Chiropractors continue to expand their practices by offering a wider variety of services. This can be driven by market forces and opportunities or the chiropractor’s passion for certain services. We are now starting to see practices entering into partnerships with fitness clubs and/or incorporating personal training, Pilates, yoga or vibration studios into their practices. If done right, there are many advantages to these types of integrations. However, if done the wrong way, albeit with good intentions, they can be a severe drain on your valuable time, resources and money. Whether you are looking at moving your practice into a fitness facility or adding a small fitness boutique to your existing practice, certain things are required for you to be successful.

Partnering With a Fitness Club

Associating your practice with a fitness club offers several distinct advantages. Dr. Thien Dang Tan, clinical director of the Clinic for Sport Medicine in North York, Ontario, understands this well. His practice is associated with the Fitness Institute in Toronto.

According to Dr. Tan, "Having access to fitness club members is an important part of my practice. You have a captive audience that is proactive in their health and wellness needs, in addition to being the right demographic for a chiropractic practice that deals with sports injuries and wellness."

Another advantage is the ability to have access to the fitness club’s equipment. Dr. Tan is heavily involved in sports therapy and has the ability to progress patients from his clinic to a more intense rehabilitation and conditioning program in the fitness club. "This allows me to provide a smooth transition into the different phases of care. I don’t need to send the patient off somewhere else where I may not be able to monitor them as closely as having them next door."

Key Considerations

Although there are advantages to this type of partnership, there are some things to consider. First, by associating with a fitness club, you need to be careful not to provide the perception that your practice is somehow fully connected to the health club. According to Dr. Tan, "It’s important to have the right
marketing message for the community, in addition to the right internal marketing message for club members. If this is not done correctly, the outside community may think that they need to be a member of the club to become a patient of your practice.”

Second, when setting up negotiations with a fitness club, always make sure you know the type of services you will provide, not just in the short term, but five years or more down the road. Some chiropractors may get a wake-up call when they move in and then realise they are unable to offer weight-loss programs or wellness programs, or even utilize the services of the fitness club area.

In addition, the fitness club may turn around and begin renting out space to massage therapists or other professionals, bypassing your ability to build up a multidisciplinary practice. The best thing to do is get everything in writing.

Third, you need to do your research into the demographics of the fitness club. Are the members primarily young gym rats or is the club attracting a lot of baby boomers? Does the club compete to offer the lowest prices or do they upsell personal training and profit centres? This will give you a good indication of the type of patients you can attract.

Having a price-sensitive younger clientele may make you focus more on becoming an acute injury and rehab practice, whereas having a more affluent, older population may allow you to build a wellness, nutrition and anti-aging practice. Doing your research will ensure that you do not walk into this situation blindly.

One of the most important points to remember is that your practice philosophy should closely match that of the fitness club employees and members. If you are passionate about fitness and health, it will show. Remember, you will also be working out at the facility and spending a considerable amount of time educating the employees and members. According to Dr. Tan, "One of the first things I did was work out at the facility and get to know the trainers. You have to be good at developing, and cultivating, relationships so that you are basically branding yourself as the doctor for any need the members have. This is probably more important than any marketing you will do.”

**Integrating Fitness Services in Your Practice**
Apart from aligning yourself with a fitness club, there is a growing trend for chiropractors to integrate fitness-related services within their practice. These can range from yoga to Pilates to personal training to circuit training programs. Dr. Scott Wilson, president of Physiomed, sees this trend continuing: "We first started aligning ourselves with fitness clubs in 1995. ... We believe that chiropractors will continue to expand their practices so that they are able to meet the demands of the entire continuum of care. At the end of the day, the patient is the one that wins."

Dr. Crystal Longo, a practitioner in Bobcaygeon, Ontario, has seen this trend in her practice and is making the transition. According to Dr. Longo, "I initially focused my practice on acute care, but then progressed to offering rehab services. However, we did our research in our community and feel that making the transition to adding a fitness club to our practice is viable. Our community has a large baby boomer population, and they are more comfortable in knowing there is a health professional available to support their fitness goals."

**Things to Consider**

In order to become successful with this model, there are several points to take into consideration. Again, try not to confuse the community. Either you separate both types of businesses and market them separately, or integrate the fitness-related aspects of the business within your rehabilitation space. The first method allows you to be focused on marketing to two distinct groups of clients and patients. However, there is the synergy of being able to perform cross-referrals.

If you are going to do this, it’s best to partner up with a trainer who will commit their time and energy to build up that part of the business. The less you do, the more you can stay focused on building your chiropractic practice. If you integrate personal training within your rehabilitation area, then a greater focus on converting your patient base to long-term fitness solutions will be required.

Another key ingredient to success is pricing. If you have never run a fitness-based practice before, you will need to do your research into the prices being charged in your area for the services you are looking to provide.

Will you charge a membership? If so, do you know the common attrition rates that go with running a fitness facility? Do you know the best way to market this type of facility? Staffing is also slightly different in this model. There are general busy periods during which you will have to allocate staff. Initial tours and price presentations are also slightly different in the fitness field. There are laws that outline the parameters you
must use for a membership contract.

In addition, bundling up the fitness side of the business with profit centres will increase the chance of success. In a highly successful fitness facility, profit centres (e.g. nutrition, weight-loss products and programs, a health food and smoothie bar, fitness assessments, personal training) can sometimes make up 40 percent of the revenue. Without profit centres, you will have to work harder to attract more members.

When all is said and done and you have taken your passion and made it a reality, it’s the numbers that matter. Developing a solid business plan with the right numbers will lead to success. Minimum membership numbers to carry that part of the business should be assessed. Attrition rates should also be plugged into any business plan. Implementing a larger number of profit centres will also ensure revenue generation apart from memberships or personal training sessions.

**Do Your Homework**

For chiropractors looking to expand their practices, developing a fitness-based business - either by partnering with a fitness club or offering fitness-related services in your existing practice - is just one of many ways to address the needs of the patients and surrounding community. I have seen many chiropractors pursue this goal because of the enthusiasm and drive they have for fitness, health and well-being. However, too many rely only on their knowledge of running a chiropractic practice, not realising that a fitness practice or addition requires different systems and procedures. Making sure the numbers work and the business plan is viable is the best way to ensure you can pursue your passions within a successful working model.

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