

Eli's Rehab Report

Trends: Don't Blur The Line Between Fitness and Therapy

But you can tap into this growing trend safely -- here's how.

You already have the facility, the highly trained staff, and the patients, so tapping into the booming fitness industry by offering personal training services is a no-brainer, right? Not so fast.

Though you may have some elements in common with fitness clubs, looking to that business model to increase referrals or appeal to new clients can quickly backfire, warns **Lyndean Brick**, principal with **Murer Consultants** in Joliet, Ill.

"There's no question that people are staying more fit as they age and are looking for avenues to stay healthy," confirms **Paul Martin, MPT**, president of **Martin Healthcare Advisors** in Mount Laurel, N.J. The fitness industry is thriving as a result -- but therapy practices looking to cash in on the trend may be getting in over their heads, he says.

If you're considering branching out into fitness and personal training services, consider this expert advice:

Your Rehab Can't Compete With The Local Gym

"Competing directly with a fitness club is a losing battle," Martin asserts. Overhead alone puts rehabs at a disadvantage, but then you have to factor in all the extras people have come to expect from a gym, he says.

Example: Your practice must pay for an up-to-date facility, hire qualified and licensed professionals, and comply with a wide range of federal regulations, among all the other demands. Meanwhile, a gym can hire anyone who's completed a basic fitness course. That's the only stipulation they must meet.

Now consider the perks that are part and parcel in the fitness arena: televisions, bottled water, one-on-one training and group classes, showers, weight rooms, multiple machines, and more. The imbalance is obvious, Martin notes.

Reality: "We have seen practices lease large spaces with the thinking they can charge monthly fees for people wanting to work out," but the dynamics are too different and the fitness industry is too competitive, Martin says. "You wind up working ten times harder with ten times the risk without any of the profit," he cautions.

Work Liability Into Your Revenue Equations

Just providing the services and attracting a fitness-based clientele isn't the only challenge facing therapy practices hoping to compete with gyms. You must also manage patient expectations and prepare to pony up if a client misunderstands what services he or she paid for.

Consider this: Clients coming to your practice for fitness purposes "may be confused whether they're seeing a therapist or a fitness trainer," Brick points out -- and that confusion could lead the person to go against her instincts because she believes a "medical professional" is guiding her.

Not only does this type of confusion breed distrust among potential fitness members, it also opens the door for a liability suit, Brick warns. For instance, if a trainer pushes a client to work harder and for longer than he is ready for and thereby causes an injury, the client may blame the therapy practice because that's who's running the show -- even if the trainer isn't a PT, she says.

Your job: If you choose to offer both therapy and fitness training, you must regularly educate your patients and clients about the differences in the two tracks, Brick recommends.

"Every person in your facility must be clear about what services they're getting, and each employee needs to be clear about what services they're offering," she says. That way, no trainer implies that the client is getting therapeutic treatment -- and no client falsely assumes she's getting therapy services at a fraction of the price.

Base Services On Value, Not Quick Cash

How much people pay for a service affects their perception of its value -- and that should be a huge deterrent to doubling up on the two tracks, Martin says.

Think of it this way: When patients see someone come in off the street and receive what appear to be the same services, the patients will question why they have to pay more. "Your skilled, qualified therapy work becomes less valuable because it appears that people don't have to pay very much for it," Brick warns.

Better: "Therapists should work at the top of their license," Brick advises. That way, you don't have to worry whether someone will ask how one hour of time can be worth \$200 but the next hour is only worth \$65, she explains.

Rather than look to fitness services as a way to boost revenue or bring in new clients, practices should "focus on increasing efficiency and better managing existing patients," Martin says. Outcomes will improve, patients will recommend you to their friends and family, and you'll find increased revenues naturally follow.

Choose 'Post Rehab' Rather Than 'Fitness'

While offering up your rehab facility as a fitness club probably isn't the right route, you can maximize the trend for healthier, more active living -- starting with the patients you're already treating.

Do it: You can create a post-rehab program that helps current and former clients maintain their health and increase their strength under your guidance after they're discharged from a plan of care, Martin suggests.

A post-rehab program allows you to use your existing space to continue and deepen your relationships with your clients, Martin says. Your patients move into a self-pay model and you match their therapy to their increasing ability level, but that's all that changes.

With a program like this, you'll keep patients close to your facility and your therapists -- and those patients are guaranteed to rave about the program to their friends, family, and coworkers.

If the post-rehab program starts to grow, you can justify adding more space or increasing the variety of services you offer, Martin insists.

Bonus: With a post-rehab program, your marketing options expand. Not only can you let your referral sources know that you offer ongoing treatment and care, you can also reach back into your list of former patients to offer them the chance to pick up where you left off.

The bottom line: "The goal is to keep patients engaged in your services and emotionally connected to your therapists," Brick says. You don't want to confuse them or overwhelm your staff with fitness options that aren't part of your core services.

Editor's note: Want to know more about post-rehab programs? You'll find a breakdown of pros and cons, as well as the many business and regulatory issues you should consider in the next issue of **Eli's Rehab Report**.