

# What is proposed to overweight and obese youth in a sample of fitness centres?



Marc CLOES



M-C LEBRETHON



Grégory FORTEMPS



## Statement of the problem

- ◆ The increase of obesity in people all around the world becomes a major concern for health authorities.
- ◆ Obesity related illnesses are estimated to account for as much as 7% of total healthcare costs in the EU (2006).
- ◆ Youth physical activity is pointed out as a priority to fight against this inexorable evolution.
- ◆ As stated in the ecological model (Sallis, 2006), and according to their proximity to the people, the communities and all of their components are considered as key agents in the promotion of an active lifestyle.
- ◆ Since the 80's, the fitness centres are proposing a growing number of activities that can be divided into several categories: collective courses, fitness training, sports, and well-being.
- ◆ Very little is known about how the fitness centres contributes to the overall effort against obesity.

## Goals of the study

- ◆ To identify the representations of fitness centres managers about the integration of overweight/obese youth in their programs
- ◆ To determine the activities that are proposed to this group of potential clients
- ◆ To share experiences of some managers who were involved in specific programs



## Methods

- ◆ 13 fitness centres of the Liege area were visited (analysis of the context, collecting written documentation about the activities).
- ◆ 14 interviews with the managers have been conducted (introduction, characteristics of the manager and of the centre, description of the customers' characteristics, presentation of the activities organized by the centre, opinions about the overweight/obese youths within the fitness centre, opportunities to develop specific activities for this group).
- ◆ The interviews were conducted by the same researcher who was trained before data collection.
- ◆ Content analysis has been performed from verbatim transcripts (units of meaning classified into one inductive category system for each topic).
- ◆ Qualitative analysis was operated, so results will not be based on percentages and statistics.

## Results and discussion

### Characteristics of the fitness centres?

- ◆ According to the current Belgian legal context, managers are not compulsory graduated in PE (graduation: 4 PE, 2 PE + physiotherapy, 1 physiotherapy, 1 nutritionist, 2 higher education in other fields, 4 secondary level); almost all of them followed specific fitness instructors and/or sport coaches courses.
- ◆ All centres proposed similar activities but only 3 had personal coaching and 3 well-being collective courses (table 1).

Table 1	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10	M11	M12	M13	M14
Cardio-vascular training	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Muscular training	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Emphasis on pathologies (back, injuries, heart...)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Collective courses (muscular)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Collective courses (cardio)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Fitness training	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Personal coaching			✓						✓					✓
Collective courses (swimming)			✓	✓						✓				✓
Collective courses (well-being)								✓						✓
Collective courses (fun)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

- ◆ Customers are 'diversified' (M2, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12). 'Oldest' clients attend on the morning while students arrive at the end of the afternoon and during the evening; athletes and beginners participate at the evening. Above 30, people chose health-based activities while younger are focused on 'body shape' (males work on muscular training, females are interested by weight control). One centre is reserved for women (i.e. Muslims).
- ◆ Youths are accepted on a case-by-case basis (height, autonomy); girls earlier than boys.

### And for overweight people?

- ◆ Two categories of clients: those who are there to lose weight/maintain a 'normal' weight and those who are clearly overweight or obese.
- ◆ 90% of the programs are focused on weight control but obese people are a minority (M1, 2, 3, 7, 9, 10) except in two centers (M4,8) that were opened to work with overweight (young) persons, but they gave up.

*'I had many, as the centre was specialized, and I still have some. But last year, I did another test. It was with a young 14 year-old boy who became in danger {obesity}. He came only 4 times. He was here to follow his physician's recommendations.'*

- ◆ Overweight adolescents require specific care

*'We had some problems with overweight youths. Their parents were there and wanted to push them. ... But, if he has no friend, he will not enjoy. He should come with one friend. The youth must be at the start! If he doesn't decide, it will not work.'*



### What actions for overweight youths?

- ◆ Overweight youths participating in the centres' activities are welcomed as other customers.
- ◆ Recommended activities would be 'working in the fitness room' (with specific machines equipped with modern softwares – n=4), 'small group' (n=2), 'individualized follow up' (n=2), 'collective course' (n=7). It is noteworthy that several managers underlined that a combination of activities would be appropriate.
- ◆ Several examples of new activities to be implemented have been provided ('providing an appointment to a group of overweight youths who will be coached by one trained instructor'; 'adding a fitness instructor who will take care of the overweight youths'; 'adapting some collective courses for the overweight youths'; 'proposing playful activities for youths under 16'; 'organizing group activities in the fitness room').
- ◆ With the exception of M4 and M8 who already (unsuccessfully) implemented such activities, the managers were ready to experiment one activity if there was a demand from enough customers. 5 managers did not insist on cost-effectiveness as such initiative would be well accepted like a good promotion for the centre.
- ◆ R4 pointed out that her initial project was well considered but it was too expensive (no financial support from the social security) and suffers from a lack of persistence of the youths (they have short-term objectives). R8 added that parents are not always able to provide the needed support.
- In conclusion:** fitness centres might be interesting partners, but a real coordination with other structures should be necessary to increase the success rate.