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**Public Consultation
on the Green Paper on the European Workforce for Health**

EHFA Input

I. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Presentation of the EHFA
- 1.2 Presentation of the benefits of the Fitness activities
- 1.3 The EHFA and the Green Paper on the European Workforce for Health

II. FACTORS INFLUENCING THE WORKFORCE FOR HEALTH IN THE EU AND THE MAIN ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED

- 2.1 Demography and the promotion of a sustainable health workforce
- 2.2 Public health capacity
- 2.3 Training
- 2.4 Managing health mobility of health workers within the EU

III. COHESION POLICY

IV. CONCLUSION

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Presentation of the European Health and Fitness Association www.ehfa.eu

The mission of EHFA is to bring together the health and fitness industry in Europe and forge a collective public affairs effort that represents the interest of the health and fitness industry at the European level: **More People | More Active | More Often**

EHFA emerged out of the successful European Network of Fitness Associations that was established in 1996. Re-vamped in 2001, and under the new chairmanship of Harm Tegelaars appointed in 2007, EHFA is moving forward gaining support not only from the major stakeholders involved in the health and fitness sector in Europe, but also securing EU funding to further develop the association's activities.

Through its accreditation programme of EHFA training providers, and its **European Register of Exercise Professionals**, www.ereps.eu, the EHFA's main goal is to raise standards for the European health and fitness industry and promote best practice in instruction and training to help battle the inactivity and obesity challenges spreading across Europe.

EHFA also provides intelligence services by gathering and disseminating relevant information to its members; EHFA aims to fully document the European fitness industry and to drive the need for research; EHFA provides a networking platform and is an open organisation that individuals passionate about exercise, as well as major companies and federations are free to join.

The European Health & Fitness Association represents an industry which generates revenue of 20 billion Euro annually, provides employment to 370.000 staff, and affiliates 40 million members in public and private health & fitness clubs across Europe. The EHFA's total representation is currently standing at approx 6500 health clubs and leisure centres in 22 countries across Europe.

1.2 Presentation of the benefits of the Fitness Activities

Fitness is not only a recreational activity. The benefits of fitness are much deeper and widespread as one could believe.

From an **individual perspective**, it is widely known and proven that fitness helps preventing health issues ranging from cardiovascular diseases or the apparition of certain cancers (breast, prostate, colon cancers). Furthermore, the practice of fitness creates more generally a lifestyle balance, as fitness, through the care of the body, helps increase self-confidence and self-esteem.

Through the provision of nutritional and lifestyle advice, fitness professionals also make sure to spread the message that a healthy way of living depends on various factors such as nutrition, physical and mental well-being, handling of stress and pressure, or the importance of sleep quality.

Additionally, fitness centers also are centers of social interaction as they make possible for participants to meet, which helps people building a social network.

As a whole, fitness helps building a strong feeling of well-being that gives people the adequate tools to face the daily challenges of life with a more positive and confident approach.

From a **societal perspective**, fitness activities have a visible and direct impact on societies. Indeed, fitness activities, by making people fitter, help reducing for instance the absenteeism rate of workers, as the number of sick leaves diminishes. The society as a whole can thus be more productive, while, at the same time, health expenses for the Member States can be dramatically reduced.

1.3 EHFA and the Green Paper on the European Workforce for Health

The European Health and Fitness Association is pleased to present hereby its contribution to the Consultation Process on the Green Paper on the European Workforce for Health.

The listing of challenges facing today our societies (i.e. aging populations, new technology to be introduced for better quality healthcare, the new threats to health and the increasing spending on health that these elements imply) is a reality that EHFA has been aware of for a long time and to which it tries to bring adequate answers.

Under the current denomination and understanding by the EU, the fitness industry is not perceived as a health actor strictly speaking. EHFA aims at demonstrating that the health agenda for fitness professionals is not something marginal. On the contrary, health agenda is at the very core of the fitness activities. It should not be forgotten that EHFA is the Health and Fitness Association. In the conception of our members, these two elements are a match, a single entity that cannot be separated.

Thus, EHFA categorises itself in the pane of “Allied Health Professionals” by referring to the EU chart “Scope of the Workforce for Health”. Indeed, by making people **More People | More Active | More Often**, the health and fitness industry tries on a daily basis to bring a solution to the burden of lifestyle-related diseases and inequalities.

The EU Green Paper on Workforce for Health “aims to foster good health in an ageing Europe by promoting good health throughout the lifespan (...) and by supporting dynamic health systems and new technologies”.

Through this Consultation Paper, EHFA aims at renewing its unconditional support to the initiatives undertaken by the DG SANCO and will explain how its objectives and suggestions of possible actions can be implemented by the health and fitness sector.

II. FACTORS INFLUENCING THE WORKFORCE FOR HEALTH IN THE EU AND THE MAIN ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED

2.1 Demography and the promotion of a sustainable health workforce

Ageing population and ageing health workforce are two pressing challenges that needed to be answered quickly. On the one hand, there are more people with needs related to their health, that need to be followed and monitored by competent and skilled health workers in order to ensure that the right solution is given to their specific issue. On the other hand, there is an increasing shortage of traditional health professionals. A third parameter is that Member States will need time before finding adequate and satisfying solutions to face this shortage of health professionals.

This situation makes obvious that there is an increasing necessity to find adequate alternatives to make the health workforce sustainable and able to face challenges. There is also a blatant need to change the perspective that regards health professionals. So far health professionals are traditionally those that participate in the process of “healing” people.

EHFA believes that the issue should be looked from a different angle. **Professionals that promote prevention of health issues, or healthy and balanced lifestyles should be included under the term of Workforce for Health. Health and Fitness professionals are helping people to be physically and mentally fit, so that they can participate more actively and more dynamically in the social and economic thriving of a society.**

The European Register of Exercise Professionals, www.ereps.eu, which operates under the umbrella of EHFA, is acutely aware of these issues, and has been designing methods to ensure that more health and fitness professionals with higher qualifications are working with a view to bring a solution to these challenges.

EREPS has also repeatedly emphasised that Health and Fitness Professionals do not attempt to be substitute of doctors, as they are not qualified to diagnose conditions. What health and fitness professionals are however in a position to do is to bring solutions to those clients for whom physical activity can help solve the condition diagnosed. For instance, if someone suffers from deviation of posture due to too much sitting in front of a computer, physical exercise monitored by a fitness professional could solve the problem.

To sum it up, health and fitness activities address the burden of lifestyle-related diseases, by:

- Enhancing prevention of serious conditions by encouraging safe physical activities
- Working hand in hand with doctors to bring solution to mechanical / physical disorders,
- By disseminating advice on healthy and balanced lifestyles.

Therefore, EHFA believes that it is legitimate that recruitment and training campaigns for the Health Workforce should put an emphasis on careers in the health and fitness sector.

The fitness sector is flourishing and offers a wide variety of specialisation and prospects of career for young people. It is also a sector that keeps looking for possible areas of improvement with the constant concern to offer better quality of service to customers. EHFA thinks however that the health agenda of the fitness industry needs to be made more obvious to increase the attractiveness of the sector for people willing to start a career or to re-orientate their professional path.

2.2 Public health capacity

The health and fitness industry is all about health promotion and disease prevention. It has been shown that the risk to develop a certain number of diseases could be diminished thanks to regular physical activity (diminution of risks of coronary disease or colon cancer...).

Several fitness operators in EHFA membership developed a system for Physical Activity Readiness Questionnaire (PAR-Q) in order to make sure that health and fitness professionals, when assessing the needs and capacities of a new customer at fitness centres can clearly see what are the health concerns that need to be addressed (e.g. a sedentary, over-weight customer with a family history of coronary disease, past surgery, or recent child-birth...).

2.3 Training

Training of public health staff is an indispensable pre-requisite. Without qualified health professionals, quality services cannot be offered.

The European Register of Exercise Professionals (EREPS) already addresses this issue:

- By establishing partnerships with fitness training providers in order to ensure that future professionals are trained according to high-quality standards;
- Through its system of assessment of knowledge and skills for those people that do not have the education required to meet the standards of the EREPS, but who have the necessary professional experience, to be recognised as competent health and fitness workers.

Additionally, EREPS is aware that in a globalised world, health and fitness professionals need to adapt to new circumstances, technologies and evolving knowledge in order to remain competitive professionals.

For this reason, EREPS has settled obligations for its members to follow courses / make activities for their **Continuous Professional Development**. To do so, they are encouraged to participate in workshops, conferences and any other activity that could be a plus for their professional development.

Furthermore, health and fitness professionals do not only deal with sport people, but with casual, aged, or disabled people. The health and professional always takes into account any physical and health specificity of a customer in order to design the most suitable and effective activity programme.

2.4 Managing health mobility of health workers within the EU

The world today is smaller and goes faster, and people need to adapt to these new variables by being more mobile. If professionals of the fitness sector want to keep up with the general average level of qualifications, they need to be willing to learn and to discover more.

For this reason, people need to be mobile and to go discover new way of practising their activity. Such initiatives can only be enriching as dialogue and confrontation of methods can help develop the standards for the health and fitness industry.

For this reason EHFA fully supports the initiative of the EU to promote the "circular" movement of staff, i.e. staff moving to another country for training and/or to gain experience, and then return to their home countries with additional knowledge and skills.

III. COHESION POLICY

Structural funds are a fantastic springboard to enhance concrete and effective actions at the local and regional levels. Beneficiaries have the opportunity to use the funds to have a practical impact on the daily life of people.

Health in general has been included as one of the main objective of only one European Fund out of five, i.e. the ERDF. Health concerns should not only be part of the ERDF, but should be included in the other Structural Fund, the European Social Fund.

Structural funds can favor the training of professionals. Therefore, Member States should be given equal opportunities and means to achieve this objective. However, if Member States can only benefit from one fund, and not both, it means that at the moment, those MS that do not benefit from the ERDF are given less financial means to promote the training of health professionals, which should include health and fitness professionals.

EHFA has been designing communication strategies in order to inform and encourage its participants to develop schemes that would be eligible for the ERDF in order to support their activities, including their training and the improvement of their working conditions.

However, EHFA is of the opinion that all structural funds should be designed to tackle health challenges, and not only the ERDF. By making more structural funds more available, more impact will be seen in workforce for health across the EU.

IV. CONCLUSION

The EHFA and its members are actively participating in the improvement of healthy lifestyles of people across the EU. Unfortunately, the fitness industry is suffering from a misconception that makes people think that fitness is only about physical activity. But fitness is absolutely not only about sport, it is about balanced and health quality of living. And the professionals of the health and fitness sector have the capacity to help to improve dramatically the health of people.

This paper represents the views of its author on the subject. These views have not been adopted or in any way approved by the Commission and should not be relied upon as a statement of the Commission's or Health & Consumers DG's views. The European Commission does not guarantee the accuracy of the data included in this paper, nor does it accept responsibility for any use made thereof.