

WSU's Recreation Center:

Staff Should be Enforcing the "Wipe-Down Rule"

Washington State University's Recreation Center offers students, staff, faculty, and community members the opportunity to stay fit in a wide variety of ways. Most Rec. Center patrons come to the facility in order to improve or maintain their health. Little do they know that current Rec. Center policies make it so they are likely to leave less healthy than they arrived. All of the equipment in the Rec. Center that is handled by patrons is likely to be covered in various bacteria and viruses. Those managing the facility are not unaware of this – spray bottles of cleaner and towels are provided throughout the facility so that patrons can wipe down the machines after use. They are even reminded to do so by various posters around the facility. But most of them do not clean the machines, and therefore the Rec. Center staff should be required to enforce this "wipe-down rule." This policy change is necessary because it will greatly reduce the spread of bacteria and viruses within the Rec. It will also make it so the staff members contribute to the already-existing facility goal of promoting cleanliness and health. Finally, an environment in which patrons clean the machines before others use them will be one of mutual respect and can therefore have a positive effect on other aspects of operation within the facility. All patrons deserve to use the machines in the Rec. Center without fear of contracting a serious illness, and requiring staff members to enforce the wipe-down rule would make this possible.

Weights, lifting machines, treadmills, elliptical machines, and the rest of the equipment in the Rec. Center can easily harbor a multitude of bacteria and viruses. Thousands of patrons

use this equipment, often wearing sweaty clothing and without washing their hands. Any patron who uses a machine after someone who did not wipe it down with the cleaner provided is at risk of contracting any sickness or disease living on the machine. This is the primary reason the Rec. Center staff should be required to enforce the wipe-down rule. When patrons do not clean the machines, they put all future users at risk for getting seriously ill. One of the greatest concerns for gym patrons is the spread of CA-MRSA, strains of MRSA that “are more virulent, and cause infections of cuts, wounds, and abrasions, which are more prevalent among children and young adults....which can lead to serious and potentially fatal skin and soft tissue (sometimes necrotizing) infections” (Bloomfield et al. 87). This is clearly a dangerous illness that should be prevented from spreading. One of the main modes of transmission of these strains of MRSA is contact with contaminated shared objects, such as sports equipment (Bloomfield et al. 87). As people in positions of authority, the staff should have the power to tell patrons to wipe down their machines or face the consequence of having to leave the facility. If the patrons are compliant, then the spread of bacteria and viruses is reduced because the machines are cleaned. If they are not, then at least the offenders must leave the facility and do not have the opportunity to add bacteria to the machines they might use. Eventually, only patrons who follow this rule would be left using the facility, and the spread of bacteria and viruses would be greatly reduced.

Staff at the Rec. Center should be responsible for enforcing the wipe-down rule because the Rec. Center as a facility has demonstrated a commitment to preventing the spread of bacteria and viruses. All parts of a facility should reflect its over-arching goals, and this includes those employed there. The evidence for their commitment is clear to those who visit the Rec.

Center. On many of the weight machines, stickers have been placed that remind the user to wipe down the machine after use, and feature cartoon representations of germs, such as “McMRSA.” There are also hand-sanitizer dispensers placed throughout the weight rooms. In the locker rooms, signs indicate that patrons are to take a cleansing shower before using the pool. On the Rec. Center website, the facility vision is stated as, “To be national leaders in safe, innovative, and inclusive recreational and fitness opportunities” (“Mission, Vision, Values & Goals”). In order for use of the Rec. Center to be safe, patrons should not be likely to contract an illness from using the equipment. Each of these elements illustrates the facility’s promotion of cleanliness and preventing the spread of bacteria and viruses. Those who work in the facility should reflect this goal, for the simple fact that if they do not, they begin to undermine it. How can the management of the Rec. Center claim that they are committed to safety, which includes the preventing the spread of bacteria and viruses, but permit their staff to allow this spread to occur uninhibited? When an entire facility is committed to a specific objective, it makes this objective more likely to be achieved and gains respect for the facility from those who desire the same goal. Who doesn’t want to exercise in a gym that is wholly dedicated to keeping them free from dangerous bacteria and viruses? It is doubtful that any Rec. Center patrons aim to leave the gym with an illness they were free of at arrival. If the Rec. Center is honestly interested in preventing the spread of bacteria and viruses, the job requirements of the staff should reflect this.

If the Rec. Center staff were required to enforce the wipe-down rule, the resulting actions on the part of patrons would help increase respect between them. When a patron of the Rec. sees another showing concern for the safety of others by cleaning the machines they

use, it can easily foster respect for that person and even encourage the observer to do the same. Mutual respect between patrons helps to create a friendlier environment in the Rec. Center, and a friendly environment is almost always preferable to a hostile one. There is also the possibility that this respect could be transferred to other aspects of operation within the Rec. Center, including allowing others to use machines between repetitions and putting weights back in order so others can more easily find them. This is by no means a guarantee, but happy patrons are more likely to act in a friendly manner, and feeling respected by those around them can certainly contribute to that happiness.

Some might argue that the responsibility for keeping the machines clean should lie completely with the patrons that use them, not with the staff of the Rec. Center. It is reasonable to expect those that use the machine to clean them, and this proposal does not change that expectation. It simply shifts some of the responsibility for ensuring it gets done to those who work in the facility. It might still be said that it is the patrons' job only, and staff should not have to be concerned with it. Although this might be a fair statement, when the responsibility for wiping down machines is left solely to the patrons, it rarely gets done. A single visit to the Rec. Center is enough to show the average observer just how few people actually clean their machines. No matter how important personal responsibility may be, stopping the spread of dangerous sicknesses like CA-MRSA is a greater priority. If this can only be done by placing some of that responsibility on the staff, then so be it. It is also reasonable to assume that once patrons begin to learn that refusing to clean machines will result in removal from the facility, they will be more likely to clean them without being told. As this trend

increases, the staff will have to do less and less reminding, therefore reducing their level of responsibility and shifting it back to the patron where it belongs.

Still others may state that forcing patrons to clean the machines will not actually make them care about preventing the spread of bacteria and viruses. If patrons are not cleaning the machines out of concern for others, then those seeing them are less likely to respect them for doing so. This could be true if an observing patron actually sees a staff member tell another patron to clean their machine. But most of the time, it will at least appear that patrons are cleaning the machines of their own accord, and the respect can still be cultivated. Even further, patrons who are reminded to clean machines will most likely learn to do so without being told. By that time, they may only be cleaning them to prevent being removed from the Rec. Center, but those seeing them do so will not know that. In the best case scenario, the advising staff member can explain to the patron why cleaning machines is so important (preventing the spread of bacteria and viruses) and create a genuine concern in that individual. Even if this does not happen, and even if respect is not always created between patrons, at least the machines will be cleaned. This is the most significant goal of requiring the staff to enforce the wipe-down rule, and is worth pursuing even if respect and concern for others is not produced.

The Rec. Center on WSU's campus is a place where all patrons can increase their fitness and maintain their health. They should be able to do so without fear of becoming sick, but currently the spread of bacteria and viruses through contact with weight machines is largely unimpeded. Although bottles of cleaner and towels are readily available for patron use, most people do not utilize them. The staff at the Rec. Center should be required to enforce the wipe-down rule and ask patrons to leave the facility if they do not comply. Many of the illnesses that

can be spread through contact with contaminated surfaces are very dangerous and can cause permanent damages, especially certain strains of MRSA. No one deserves to suffer the effects of destructive and detrimental sicknesses simply because people do not take responsibility for cleaning up after themselves. Although this policy change would initially place some responsibility on the staff members to make sure the machines are clean, over time this would shift back to the patrons using the machine, and give people ownership over their health and the health of others.

Works Cited

Bloomfield, Sally F. "Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*, *Clostridium difficile*, and extended-spectrum β -lactamase-producing *Escherichia coli* in the community: Assessing the problem and controlling the spread." *American Journal of Infection Control* 35.2 (2007): 86-88. Web. 27 Sept. 2010.

"Mission, Vision, Values & Goals." *Urec.wsu.edu*. Washington State University, 2010. Web. 2 Oct. 2010.

Self Reflection

I think I've done a good job of selecting a topic that many people in my intended audience will easily identify with. This audience obviously includes you, my professor, but really can include anyone here at the University who uses the Rec. Center or is interested in promoting health. Also, most of my warrants (the spread of bacteria and viruses should be prevented for people's well being, respect between people should be promoted) are readily accepted and defensible. I also think that I've successfully laid out my argument in a way that is logical and easy to follow. I think I can work on including more of a personal aspect to my paper, such as interviewing a patron at the Rec. Center about their observations of whether people frequently wipe down machines and how they feel about this. I also fear that my paper may be a bit too long or wordy, but I find that this tends to happen when I am trying to make my point completely clear to my reader. I hope that I can work on making a clear point without being so wordy.