Are UK gyms as dangerous as construction sites?

The NHS deals with around 2 million people suffering sports-related injuries every year, placing a significant burden on musculoskeletal services and highlighting the need for proactive safety interventions across the fitness sector. However, there is no specific data available to determine how many of these injuries occurred in a gym setting, nor any details about the severity of the injuries sustained.

Fortunately, we can look to the USA where information is more widely published with exercise equipment injuries recorded as a specific category. National Safety Council data states 409,224 injuries caused by exercise equipment were reported in 2021. It also notes that injuries are also on a worrying upward trajectory, reaching 478,793 by 2024 – that's a 17% increase in only 3 years!

The UK and USA have a similar population demographic and are experiencing similar growth in gym memberships. Apart from the USA being five times larger than the UK in overall population, it is possible to use the US data to help understand what is likely to be happening in the UK.

For example, if we prorate the US data, adjusting it for the lower UK population, this suggests around 96,000 gym equipment related accidents occurred in 2024 in the UK. This is also likely to be growing at a similar rate to the USA year-on-year.

The State of the UK Fitness Industry Report 2024 estimates 10.9M gym users in the UK, which means that almost 1 in 100 could experience an exercise equipment related injury each year.

With an average gym membership of 1,500 members per club, this means that 15 members could be suffering equipment related injuries every year. If all the incidents were reported, this could also mean 15 potential insurance claims against the gym each year.

By comparison, the UK construction industry experiences around 2.4 injuries per 100 people and is one of the worst performing sectors for accidents. While the professional technical services industry (one of the best sectors) is only 0.02 per 100.

So, in terms of safety, why is the average gym more akin to a construction site than a professional services environment?

The answer could be as simple as a lack of awareness, training, and standards. For example, according to Safer-America (a consumer group), one of the leading causes of exercise equipment-related injuries is improper use. Specifically:-

- using the equipment for a purpose other than that for which it was built
- using incorrect form
- using too much weight without proper supervision

Novices and young people are particularly at risk. Better gym supervision could help; however, gym users must share responsibility. Wider discussion, awareness and education around gym safety could bring about a culture change at the very heart of the problem.

Product defects and malfunction is another significant contributor. This includes poor machine assembly, non-compliant products (ie. grey imports), using equipment which is not suitable for the environment (eg. using domestic grade equipment in a commercial environment), and lack of maintenance contributing to unpredictable performance, excessive wear and tear, and failure.

There is a need for better education around equipment selection, specification, set-up and usage. Coupled with suitable training for the servicing and repairs of equipment it is possible to make significant strides forward which will not only help make gyms safer, but also will make equipment last longer, perform better, reduce energy consumption (through more efficient equipment and fewer technician call outs).

It is possible to improve gym equipment safety, and improve member experience, and improve the bottom line, and this is where the Gym Safety Council aims to focus its efforts.

Jon Isaacs

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