

The Professionalization of Health and Wellness Coaching

By: Frank Ardito and Leigh-Ann Webster

Introduction

Health and wellness coaching is one of the newest and most rapidly expanding sectors within healthcare. The International Consortium for Health and Wellness Coaching (ICHWC) (<https://ichwc.org>) has been instrumental in professionalizing this emerging field. According to the ICHWC, “A health and wellness coach is the change-agent that shifts the culture and delivery of healthcare from dependency to empowerment.” The following represents a short chronology and eight milestones in the history of the ICHWC – each of which has contributed greatly to the advancement of this important growing profession.

Convening the Thought Leaders

Anthropologist Margaret Mead is often cited as having said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world: Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” Nearly a decade ago, several industry visionaries convened such a group. Their goal was to begin the process of creating national standards leading to a certification examination for the field of health and wellness coaching. And so it began.

Capitalizing the Cause

Interest in advancing the field rapidly gained traction, thanks to dozens of industry-leaders committing literally thousands of volunteer hours. In 2010, a generous grant provided by the Institute of Integrative Healthcare allowed for a two-day assembly of over sixty subject matter experts from a myriad of related industries and backgrounds. It was at this time that sub-groups were formed to begin the laborious work of creating the standards.

Creating the Infrastructure

Two years later, the efforts of these pioneers led to additional fundraising and ultimately the formation of the non-profit organization known today as the International Consortium for Health and Wellness Coaching (ICHWC). The work continued, leading to the development of the industry’s first job task analysis ([JTA](#)). The field of health and wellness coaching could finally operate with the underpinnings of a more robust evidence-base.

Collaborating with Healthcare

In 2016, the ICHWC joined forces with the National Board of Medical Examiners (NBME) to begin the process of creating a national board certification for health and wellness coaches. This was a classically synergistic partnership, with ICHWC providing the subject matter expertise and NBME lending its formidable proficiency in examination development and administration. This relationship also

reinforced the unequivocally valuable role that a health and wellness coach can play within the healthcare continuum.

Certifying the Workforce

The arduous task of creating a national board examination was no modest undertaking. Countless hours of collaboration with industry experts and the convening of several additional groups of volunteers led to the development of the credential, “National Board Certified Health and Wellness Coach (NBC-HWC).” Leveraging the reach of the NBME, the first national board examination took place in September of 2017. Since then, two additional examinations have been successfully conducted, and today there are over 1,400 NBC-HWC’s in the United States. Recognizing the fact that the health and wellness coaching industry is rapidly emerging, and in an effort to support its applicants, ICHWC published a national board certification content outline with scholarly resources.

Continuing the Education

The effort to establish guidelines for completing required continuing education for national board-certified health and wellness coaches commenced in 2017. In 2018 the procedures were broadened to allow for more options for certification holders. To-date, the ICHWC is pleased to offer nine continuing education categories, allowing for literally thousands of opportunities. It is also proud to officially recognize more than 20 approved continuing education providers, a list that is rapidly growing.

Credentialing the Training Programs

As the important work of creating the national board examination continued, the needs of the health and wellness coach training programs were thoughtfully considered. In July of 2015, the ICHWC launched a “transitional approval” process for programs, which resulted in the recognition of 52 programs that met the published standards. This first-step eventually led to the formation of the ICHWC Program Approval Commission (PAC). The PAC immediately began the development of a more rigorous approval process – one that more comprehensively identified health and wellness coach training programs that were providing curricula commensurate with the job task analysis. In September of 2018, the new Program Approval Process (<https://ichwc.org/organizations/>) was released. At present time, dozens of programs throughout the United States and several other countries are in the process of completing their applications.

Considering the Future

The future is certainly promising for the field of health and wellness coaching. Opportunities abound, thanks largely to a rapidly expanding evidence-base and the continued dedication of countless individuals. Recently, The ICHWC and the American College of Preventive Medicine (ACPM) (<https://www.acpm.org>) have partnered with the CDC to develop a group coaching training and certificate program to support the National Diabetes Prevention Program. The partnership, which started in 2017, is expanded by a \$500,000 grant and multi-year collaboration to improve the skills and outcomes of DPP lifestyle coaches.

Today, in partnership with the NBME, the ICHWC continues its dedication to the development of a capable, competent, and sustainable workforce of health and wellness coaches – one that will support the needs of the healthcare industry for decades to come.

About the authors and the ICHWC:

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Frank Ardito has enjoyed a career in the fields of health, wellness, and coaching for over twenty-five years. He currently serves as Professor in the Biological and Health Sciences Division at the College of Lake County. Prior to this, he was a research scientist at UIC's School of Public Health, Dept. of Epidemiology and Biostatistics. Frank currently serves on the Board of Directors for the International Consortium for Health and Wellness Coaching (ICHWC). His latest book, "The Self-Care Cookbook: A Holistic Approach to Cooking, Eating, and Living Well" is now available at major booksellers everywhere.



Leigh-Ann Webster is the Executive Director of the International Consortium for Health & Wellness Coaching. She has over 20 years of experience in marketing and community relations, and is also a National Board Certified Health and Wellness Coach (NBC-HWC), and a certified personal trainer. Leigh-Ann is an active board member for the San Diego Regional YMCA and believes all people should have opportunities to live a healthy and energetic life. In her spare time, Leigh-Ann enjoys spending time with family, being in nature, participating in triathlons, healthy cooking and travel.