

## ( niche club )

A new gym and fitness centre has opened in London's West End and it breaks the mould of traditional health and fitness clubs in almost every way. Could this, though, be the forerunner of future wellness provision?

# a one-on-one success

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Imagine the perfect health club ... you walk into a sleek reception area with a state-of-the-art access control system and smiling receptionists greet you. You go to a treatment room redolent of streamlined sophistication, then head on through to the gym, where ranks of exercise bikes with headphone-draped pedallers pulse to the beat of the surround sound, eyes fixed firmly on the machine's integrated screens.

The reality when you visit Health Dept., London's latest gym and health centre, is very different. Walk off bustling Baker Street and turn into a quiet, brick-paved mews. Press the buzzer outside the green painted door – the entrance to a building that looks as if it started life as stables – and hide your surprise when Pete Williams, the MD, welcomes you in ... to the kitchen!

"We use it as the hub of our operation," smiles 33-year-old Williams, founder of the club. "It's the office (complete with computer, phones, desks and files hidden behind kitchen cabinet doors), it's where clients come for a chat or some refreshment, it's where we have our lunch." And it doesn't matter if a client is there when Williams and his colleagues are eating. "I think it's good for them to see we eat too, particularly those who are concerned about their weight. If they see us sitting down to smoked mackerel fillets and a big salad smothered in olive oil, they realise you can eat well and be healthy."

### philosophy and function

Health Dept. is the rebranded, relocated version of Williams' original club, West1OnOne, which he founded six years ago and is a far cry from the standard fitness centre.

"Health clubs, to be honest, are in the business of making money. That's not how I want to work," states Williams firmly.

His business promotes the importance of health, exercise and nutrition as the way to achieve optimum wellbeing. It looks after clients on a one-to-one basis. There are never more than two in the club at the same time and the space is designed so, if they don't want to meet anyone, they can do their training in completely separate areas.

Williams, a certified strength and conditioning specialist, has 14 years' experience, particularly in clinical and hormonal aspects of health, exercise and nutrition. Colleagues are also 'two-degree' people, a level of qualification Williams insists on.

Ian Craig specialises in endurance training, strength and conditioning plus the application of nutritional medicine to health and fitness. US-qualified Charlene Hutsebaut is a sports injury rehabilitation expert and is experienced in cardiac rehabilitation, women's health and stress management. Glenn Sontag is the visiting massage therapist. He has developed a new form of massage, Swai, which combines techniques from both Swedish and Thai systems. Bronwyn Timbs is the physiotherapist and is widely experienced in musculoskeletal injuries.

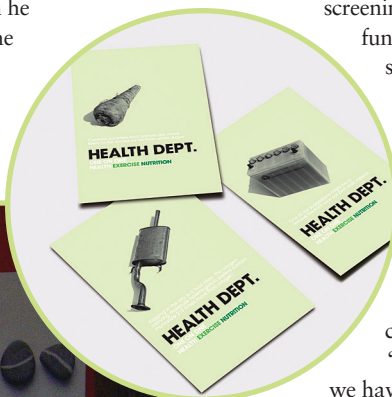
The club's aim is to help clients to understand how optimum health and fitness can be achieved. Its efforts build on the core disciplines of strength and conditioning, CV health, rehabilitation therapy and nutrition. But it goes much further. Every aspect of a client's lifestyle is examined – emotional, clinical and psychological.

A series of tests greets a new member. Not just heart and lung function, but digital screening of the body, functional movement screening to show flexibility, blood tests, liver and thyroid function, cholesterol levels and more. Williams has a support system of medical practices, osteopaths and nutritional institutes to whom he can refer clients, or they can consult their own doctor.

One thing no one escapes is the psychological profile. "We need it to understand how to deal with clients," explains Williams. "If we don't get the approach right, we and the client won't get the results." All new clients have at least a one-hour chat before any course of treatment and exercise is determined. "The client tells us what they want to achieve and we have to be completely frank with each other," says Williams. "They have to be seriously committed to change in their lifestyle, be prepared to work hard and follow direction. When they are, they will invariably succeed."

### take a walk around

The environment is of paramount importance to Williams, who believes that, when it is right, it is conducive to the totally focused input he expects from his clients. "That was the problem



The treatment room is a tranquil area designed to be homely rather than clinical







Health Dept. (above) sits on a quiet, brick-paved mews just off of London's Baker Street

with West1OnOne," he explains. "It was in Harley Street – high ceilinged and gloomy with all the atmosphere of a doctor's consulting rooms."

Clean, uncluttered, spacious, naturally lit and vented are the words used by the man who likes wide open windows, hates air conditioning, wants plenty of space for clients to move around easily and allows members to "come straight in, train and go straight out."

It took four years' searching to find the mews premises with its 2,200sq ft space on two levels. Once through the door, if you don't turn left into the kitchen, planters full of greenery against a ceiling-high glass partition 'branded' with central green glass panels screen you from the treatment room.

This is a tranquil area. A treatment couch to one side, exercise mats to relax on, a throw-covered comfy sofa and a small table all make it homely rather than clinical. The back wall – brick, as are all interior walls – is painted a deep red and has a full-length shelf dotted with aromatherapy candles. Translucent ceiling-to-floor muslin curtains mask the entrance's glass partition and create privacy.

Behind the treatment rooms are dry changing rooms, showers and toilets (just two of each – but beautifully equipped) a help-yourself posse of colourful towels rolled neatly on shelves, a wall mirror and a few lockers.

The white-tiled showers are Williams' pride and joy. He was restricted by water pressure regulations in Harley Street, so has gone the whole hog here. An eight-inch shower head is set in the ceiling of each cubicle and according to Williams, "the effect is pretty exfoliating!"

Go up the narrow staircase and the gym areas open out in the loft-style space with its high, white-painted walls and beams, generous sash windows and skylights. The two rooms have interconnecting doors, which can be locked if a client wishes to train in complete anonymity. There's another set of stairs to the ground floor at the far end so they can leave without being seen.

The thick rubber floors are delightfully springy. "I encourage people to take off their trainers and exercise in bare feet. This flooring is so comfortable, gives a good grip and it's much better for the feet to exercise without shoes," says Williams.

There are no mirrors, no pictures, no posters, no TV or audio and no music – any type of distraction is banned in this stress free exercise zone.

What's surprising is that there is a minimum of equipment. A set of Cybex freeweights and Palini light weights, a CybexPro treadmill and an exercise bike look almost lost in the space. Body Blades – "I had to go in person to Heathrow to pick them up," complains Williams. "The package said 'blades' on the outside and they thought it was weapons!" – balance and core



The gym boasts the minimum of equipment including core balls and Body Blades



There are no posters or televisions to distract members in the gym

balls, a climbing rope suspended from the ceiling, a compact dumbbell set from Powerblock, USA, a punch bag and punch ball, some tennis balls and Frisbies complete the equipment. There's no fixed siting for any of the equipment, so the rooms can be changed around to suit a particular client's exercise programme.

Williams understands the need to use machines for some purposes, but he is aware that they can detract from the way the whole body moves, something which he feels is very important. "If someone could only afford one piece of equipment I'd recommend a medicine ball because you can do so much with one," he says.

Ball games of all types are very much part of the training routine. Anything that allows us to play games helps movement, balance, flexibility, reaction, believes Williams.



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Exercise mats, strategically placed under the open room's skylights so you get a feeling of the great outdoors, provide relaxation sites for after a workout.

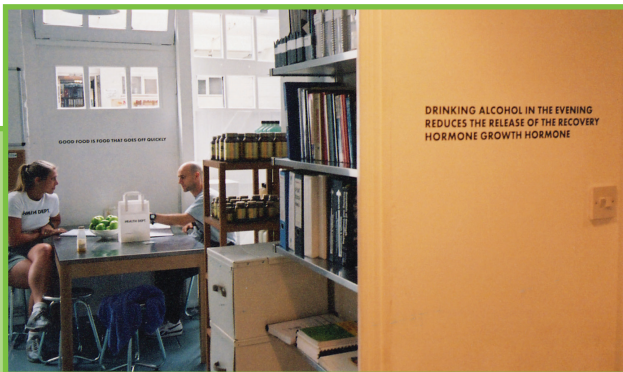
Nutritional advice is high on the agenda both for weight loss and building up, where needed. Dieting is not mentioned. "I'm not interested in how much people weigh," says Williams. "Strength and conditioning plus the correct nutrition will get the body into the right shape. I've a client who has been with us for three years and has dropped three dress sizes. I don't know if she's lost weight, but she certainly looks great.

Multi-vitamin and mineral supplements from Solgan are available but special nutritional products are ordered in specifically for a client's needs.

### costs and clients

Health Dept. represents a £100k investment for Williams and his business partners, property investors Simon Berry and Andrew Lewis Pratt, whom he first met when they were his clients at West1OnOne.

Williams has never needed to advertise. His clients, who are mostly London-based but are occasionally European visitors over here on regular business trips, come via personal



### pete's pointers

One thing you can't miss, walking round the club, are little printed messages on the walls – a bit like the sayings of Chairman Mao.

"They're sort of subliminal reminders for people of what they're learning here," says Williams.

The kitchen hosts 'Post exercise nutrition is as important as the training itself'. Near the showers is 'Drinking alcohol in the evening inhibits growth hormone output overnight – that's the one that repairs the body'.

Near the exercise area 'Pruning roses is a far more enjoyable form of hand grip exercise,' leaps out at you and, on the toilet wall is the apt reminder 'The squat utilises around 70 per cent of the body's total muscle mass; full body training in one exercise!'

THE SQUAT UTILISES AROUND 70% OF THE BODY'S TOTAL MUSCLE MASS; FULL BODY TRAINING IN ONE EXERCISE



BEING IN THE GYM BREAKS DOWN YOUR BODY; IT IS ONLY IN REST, THE CORRECT NUTRITION AND SLEEP WHERE IT REPAIRS ITSELF



The gym is designed so if members don't want to meet anyone, they can train in completely separate areas

recommendation and he has no difficulty filling his 70 per week maximum quota.

The typical client profile is a chief executive of a top level company, celebrities, heads of media, PR, advertising and the legal profession, plus practicing athletes and medically-referred cases. The age range is between 35 and 55 and there's a 50 per cent split between men and women.

Williams recognises that the £75-an-hour fee (there's no joining fee, but clients are asked to book a fixed number of sessions in advance) limits clients to the 'time-poor but cash-rich,' but he is still firm about them being committed to achieving changing their lifestyle. "Today, time and money are valuable commodities and neither should be wasted," he comments. "We accept our approach is not suitable for everyone and are not afraid to tell them so."

Many clients already belong to a health club and Williams sees no conflict of interest. "We can just fine trim their programmes so they get more benefit from their workouts there," he says.

Each client's programme is reviewed, and usually adapted, every four to six weeks. This reflects the progress they are making and helps maintain their enthusiasm.

### the future

Williams plans to open more clubs, but he's not in a rush. He refuses to expand purely for profit and knows that finding another building with the right ambience, staff with his 'two-degrees' criterion, and in the right location for appropriate clients, won't be easy.

One area he's hoping to extend more readily is business consultation. Currently he is working out a template for an advertising agency, whose young staff regularly go out to a bar or club on Thursday evenings.

"It's not to try and restrict what they do and what they drink, that's part of their lifestyle and what makes them happy," says Williams. "It's to work out what can be done by the company to make Friday mornings more disaster free. Simple things like providing breakfast – fruit, lots of water, juices, nutritional food selections – could help improve how the staff feel and improve their productivity." ●

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