My time in the UNC DPT program over the past 3 years has allowed me to self-define “health” or “what being healthy” means to me. In essence, the topic of health and it’s true meaning is a subjective concept. What I mean by this is that the notion of health is a perception that an individual has. When the term “health” or “healthy” is brought up, it might mean one thing to an individual while it may signify something else to another. As I reflect on my experiences in this program, I can’t help to think about the importance of self-improvement. I believe this concept suggests that an individual needs to be satisfied with who they are as a person in order to experience personal happiness. Everyone has to strive to be the best person they can be, not only physically, but also mentally. In this manner, absolute health and well-being can be achieved.

To provide optimal care as a physical therapist, you cannot merely evaluate the physical structure troubling the patient. What role does this person have in society? What do they love doing? What makes them the person they are? Are there other factors (i.e. psychosocial) contributing to this “disability”? Physical well-being is not the only focus as I stated above. I think this is one of the reasons why physical therapists are consistently viewed as rep counters. It’s disheartening to think about at times. General health is equally dependent on mental and social well-being as well. It is essential to evaluate a patient’s willingness to change their lifestyle – assessing psychosocial factors specific to the individual to understand if they are, in fact, willing to modify and adjust their means to living. Treat the cause versus the symptoms.1

As physical therapists, we are uniquely qualified and positioned in our role to promote health and wellness to the general population. Through our extensive training and knowledge base, combined with the shear time we are fortunate enough to spend with our patients, we must take it upon ourselves to at least try to influence and enhance our patient’s lifestyle choices. We need to use these tools that we have developed as current and future physical therapists, and educate our patients and community, so they too, can have the resources necessary to improve their “human experience.”2

I think one of the main challenges we face as health professionals is educating the general population and our patients and clients about ‘quick fixes’ versus lifestyle changes. Some of these programs that offer 90, 60, even 30-day aesthetically pleasing “changes.” We are a nation that generally looks for these ‘quick fixes,’ but they are often too hard, not feasible, and can result in injuries acutely or even down the road in the future. Furthermore, these programs are in most instance unsustainable and do not allow an individual to truly change. As physical therapists, we have the ability to educate our patients about true lifestyle changes and provide individualized wellness programs to optimize not only how you look, but also how you feel and how you function. We need to preach lifestyle changes versus ‘quick fixes.’ How can I as a person change my life for the rest of my life, instead of just the next few months.

What I love about our profession is that we can empower patients and clients to “self-heal.”1 We can provide individuals with the cost-effective care through interventions such as education. Education enables people to buy in to what you are trying to get them to do. If you involve the person in the process and tell them what you are thinking and how this information and/or intervention will help them, maybe they will be more compliant? If you can teach someone the rationale behind certain values and beliefs, as well thoughts and ideas, regarding health and wellness, you give them the opportunity to change their attitude and behaviors, and help them customize it to their own life.

I’ve stated the following comments previously, but I think it summarizes what I have learned and what I want to promote to society regarding the profession of physical therapy:

We are not only rehabilitators. We are consultants. Coaches. Educators. And perhaps most importantly, health and wellness enthusiasts and entrepreneurs. We have the ability to enhance someone’s life, not just restore it.

**References:**

1. Dean E. Physical therapy in the 21st century (Part 1): Toward practice informed by epidemiology and the crisis of lifestyle conditions. *Physiotherapy Theory and Practice.* 2008; 25 (5-6): 330-353.

2. American Physical Therapy Association (APTA). Beyond vision 2020. American Physical Therapy Association Website Web site. <http://www.apta.org.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/BeyondVision2020/>. Updated 2013. Accessed April 23, 2014.