

Physical Therapy, Magnified

An Interview with Rupal M. Patel, P.T., Ph.D.

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Note from the author:

Dr. Patel is an Associate Professor at the School of Physical Therapy at Texas Woman's University located within the Texas Medical Center in Houston, Texas. I had the privilege of taking several classes from her. She was always a positive influence, upbeat and energetic, even when teaching the drier topics, such as Ethics and Health Policy. The reason I chose to interview her is because of her passion for advocating for the profession—embodying an awareness of what physical therapists provide to their patients. Although I am now in my fourth year of medical school, I frequently fall back upon my knowledge and the foundations of patient care that I learned while obtaining my clinical Doctor of Physical Therapy (D.P.T.) degree: where I learned to emphasize the patient's goals, the healing power of movement, and a foundational understanding that quality of life can be just as important as quantity of life.

The following questions were answered by Dr. Patel, using her own words:

How would you define physical therapy as a profession? What services do you feel we provide to patients and other healthcare workers?

As a profession, physical therapy is coming into its 2nd century. Relative to other professions such as theology, law, and medicine, we are still young! I define physical therapy as a service that is provided by a physical therapist where we focus on health promotion, prevention, protection, preservation, restoration, maintenance, and/or enhancement of a person's movement and physical abilities that are often impaired or limited by unhealthy behaviors, social determinants of health, a condition, injury, hospitalization, or disability.

I believe as physical therapists, the most valuable service we provide is to improve the human experience of our patients or clients. We do this by listening to our patients, by observing their movements, and by building a therapeutic alliance, so that we can optimize their movement for the activities and roles they want to fulfill in life.

What is one thing you wish other healthcare workers knew about physical therapists?

I wish every healthcare provider to know that physical therapists generally get to spend time with their patients that is often much more than other healthcare providers get to do. This precious privilege of time allows us to get to know our patients on a deeper level. This means we can sometimes pick up on things that get missed by others. Physical therapists are trained to screen and diagnose musculoskeletal conditions, and we have an excellent track record of referring to, collaborating with, and following up with other providers to help the patient or client achieve their goals.

I still remember you sharing with our class that your father-in-law had type II diabetes, and that this is quite a common illness among the Asian Indian American population. How has this impacted you personally? How has it impacted how you care for your patients and your understanding of the United States healthcare system?

Watching my father-in-law struggle with the complications and consequences of diabetes was heart-wrenching. I wanted to know more about how we could have prevented some of his complications early on. So, as part of my Ph.D. in health promotion and wellness, I created and administered a [randomized controlled trial] in a community setting to look at how effective culturally tailored group-based community lifestyle modification programs could be to help transform the lives of people that may be struggling to cope with lifestyle conditions such as type 2 diabetes. This has impacted the care I provide to patients or clients in indelible ways. I now look at every patient or client I engage with from the lens of a health promoter first. I assess their health habits, the type of physical and social environment that they live, work, learn, play, pray, and age in, so that I can better assess these determinants of health that may be compromising their movement and functional abilities.

Seeing my father-in-law's experience with trying to live a quality life with diabetes made me even more aware of how broken our US healthcare system is. Our system's focus on sick care versus health care is not helping. Our healthcare system needs to change. We need to put more effort [and] money "upstream" into health care by investing in health protection, promotion, and prevention, at the community level, so that "downstream," we won't have to spend as much on

chronic or lifestyle conditions such as diabetes—and ultimately improve the quality and quantity of life of our population.

What would you say to individuals who are interested in becoming a physical therapist?

Physical Therapy is a great profession. Being a physical therapist is very rewarding because you get to be able to go to work each day and help people move more or move differently and do the things they want to do in life. For those interested in becoming a D.P.T., be ready to work hard during the professional training, which is typically three years post-baccalaureate. Know that you are entering a profession where you will have the privilege of helping people achieve their goals from “womb to tomb.” That’s because you get to work with women who are pregnant to neonates to adults and those that are nearing the end of life—and the practice settings that you can work in are as open as your imagination.

What is one way that you think Texas healthcare can improve in the next five years?

The one thing that I think we can improve upon in Texas is access to health insurance. We can do this by expanding Medicaid coverage for the nearly 20 million Texans who are uninsured—which is twice the national average!

What is one measure you take to ensure you are practicing appropriate work-life balance?

I am not sure I have ever found that perfect balance. I am striving towards it always. One thing I practice is deep breathing to help focus and center my energy, especially during busy chaotic days. I also like to get outside in nature and be intentional about experiencing it with all my senses. The Japanese call it “Shinrin-yoku” or “forest bathing.” [I find it refreshing, and it helps me renew.]

How do you hope to see the profession of physical therapy grow within the next five years?

I hope that our profession will grow by increasing awareness among consumers, other healthcare providers, and policymakers about the great value that the services of a physical therapist can bring to every American’s life. It is said that about 90% of the population could benefit from the services of a physical therapist, yet only about 20% of the population engage our services. I hope that the number changes in the next five years!

Any current projects or personal goals of yours?

Nah, nothing major. I love what I do as a physical therapist. I am an academician, researcher, clinician, servant leader, and a community health promoter. I have the privilege and honor to influence the next generation of physical therapists. What more can a gal ask for?