

Emphasis on Fitness Is a Leap in the Wrong Direction

The recent fervor emphasizing fitness and wellness services in physical therapist (PT) practice is both dated and misdirected.

My viewpoint is founded on a 29-year career that began with 8 years of orthopedics/sports medicine as a US Army Baylor PT and a post-fitness facilitator as corporate fitness began to emerge. I then moved into private practice with what some would describe as an innovative business model of a PT clinic integrated into a health club. There we trained fitness personnel to follow screening protocols, supervise and identify faulty movement patterns, and adapt exercise to special needs populations. In a Midwestern town of 3,500 we had 17 employees and 350 members, many with significant impairments and disabilities. In 2000, we won the "Best of the Best" award in new programming from the Illinois Association of Rehab Facilities. It was all very exciting but not economically sustainable—just as many PTs are discovering today.

Fast forward to today. Seven years later, my view incorporates a doctorate in transformational learning theory, an extensive leadership role in mind-body science and research, and a cash-based practice with a 6-week backlog of patients with very complex, chronic movement challenges waiting to get in and pay.

My first objection to the fitness push is that it is economically flawed. We need to leave behind mere exercise prescription and screening for those who can deliver it competently and efficiently. This includes athletic trainers, personal trainers, and exercise physiologists. Let the multi-billion-dollar fitness industry do what I and many other PTs were doing 15-20

years ago. We have advanced our practice and knowledge, as have our colleagues in the fitness arena.

As physical therapists, we should be the leaders in human movement science and practice. Movement with effectiveness and purpose (action) now is understood to involve far more than hardwired motor science and biomechanical prescription. Yet that largely remains our current standard of care.

Our profession has the potential to lead the breakthroughs in wellness and fitness if we assume the power of our doctoral-level education. Our depth of knowledge in human movement demands a leap in perspective into how we effectively deliver care that addresses the full complexity of our future clients. The challenges of adherence, accessibility to care, and motivation all require unique, creative interventions developed *with* the complex client, not a tear sheet of unrelated repetitive calisthenics.

From the "average" client who smokes with diabetes, hypertension, osteoarthritis, mild depression, and neuropathy to the young child with cerebral palsy in a socioeconomically challenged family, those are people who the fitness industry can't by either training or systems effectively serve. No other profession is positioned to understand and provide insight and care that address the transformational changes needed to shift health behaviors.

Through our creative use of the basic sciences of transformational learning—posture, movement, awareness/proprioception, and breathing—PTs can lead the future innovations in human wellness and fitness science and practice. Merely making biomechanical diagnoses and prescribing movement interven-



tions will become tantamount to superficial, technician-level work. As doctors, we should understand and make use of our ability to address and direct the complexity of care needed by increasingly savvy, movement-challenged clientele.

My concern is: Do we have the personal resolve required to break through our tired definitions of wellness and fitness?

Will we step up as those before us did?

When I entered the profession nearly 30 years ago, the emerging leaders outrageously suggested we should be mobilizing spines (Paris et al), looking at fascia (Barnes), considering chain kinematics (Gray), and so on. At the time, they were viewed as radicals.

I believe we *can*, we *must*, and we *will* step up. It will take courage, risk, and boldness to create what isn't yet. Surely the passion that brought us to physical therapy also can fuel us to bring forth the best in future human movement potential. Then those in the wellness and fitness industries can follow our lead.

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