

From the Theoretical to the Real World: How Actors Are Helping to Bridge the Gap in Nursing Education

Abstract

In popular culture, we refer to them as actors. However, in the world of healthcare education, they are Standardized Patients (SPs).

In a scripted role, a Standardized Patient can be a 20-year-old experiencing a schizophrenic crisis, an 80-year-old with Parkinson's disease, or a diabetic experiencing the confusion of low blood sugar, among other examples.

Standardized Patients provide nursing students with the opportunity to practice and refine a variety of skills relevant to their future profession. As such, SPs have become an integral part of the learning platform in healthcare education.

This article will discuss the challenges in providing adequate patient clinical experiences to Nursing students and the invaluable contribution of Standardized Patients in addressing those challenges. It will also discuss the development of an SP program as part of simulation training in the Vanier College Nursing Program. In addition, excerpts of interviews with SPs and with Nursing students having trained with SPs will be provided.

Introduction

Simulation is defined as the creation of an event, situation, or environment that closely mimics what one would encounter in the “real world” (Sinclair, 2009). In healthcare education, it enables knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be acquired by healthcare professionals in a safe, educationally-oriented and efficient manner (Okuda, 2009). For instance, simulation offers the student the opportunity to experiment with treatments without fearing the consequences of making a mistake. In fact, in the simulated hospital world, mistakes are considered valuable learning experiences.

A Standardized Patient (SP) is a healthy person trained to create, in the most realistic and accurate manner possible, a history and physical and/or emotional scenario that a nurse may encounter in practice. The SP can also act as a confederate such as a family member or other healthcare professional. SPs provide nursing students with the opportunity to practice and refine a variety of skills including communication, interview, physical examination, clinical skills, and clinical interventions. In particular, in response to ethical and legal concerns involved with students examining each other, SPs are invaluable to mastering physical examination skills.



Photo credit Rivka Guttman

The use of SPs is based in theories of medical education, including experiential learning, deliberate practice, and situated learning (Abe, Cleland and Rethans, 2013). For years, Standardized Patients have been used successfully in the assessment of learner performance (Abe, Cleland and Rethans, 2013). In nursing, one of their most important educational contributions is the immediate feedback they provide from the patient's perspective. They also provide the student with the opportunity to ask questions the student might not feel comfortable asking a “real” patient.

The History of Standardized Patients in Nursing at Vanier

In 2007, under the leadership of former Faculty Dean George Archer, the Vanier College Nursing Department received funding to hire actors who would give our students the practice they needed to succeed in the practical or OSCE (Objective Structured Clinical Exam) portion of the provincial licensing exam.

Prior to this initiative, volunteers had been recruited from college staff or among the family and friends of faculty members. The process was time-consuming and hit-or-miss in terms of reliability and acting ability. Concurrently, our Nursing program, as well as other health care programs, faced decreased availability of clinical placements. As such, ensuring that each student would be exposed to and become proficient in all clinical competencies was becoming increasingly difficult. Students were feeling unprepared for physical examination and management of patients with a variety of health problems. Furthermore, modern-day ethical concerns limited the extent to which students could practice physical examination on each other.

With the removal of the practical portion from the Order of Nurses licensing exam in 2012, the role of the actors was revised to focus on formative learning and feedback. SPs are now an integral part of our simulation learning experience.

Making It Real

High fidelity mannequins are an effective and frequently-employed tool in healthcare education, but standardized patients are advantageous over mannequins when the scenario requires students to interpret facial expressions and body language, demonstrate compassionate care, or ambulate (move) the patient. The addition of props and moulage can turn a young SP into an older patient or create burns, wounds, and even swelling of the skin. Treatments, such as insertion of an intravenous, can be provided using a fake body part placed next to the real arm. As an artist uses real models to paint, the first-year Nursing course uses an SP to help students listen to lungs, heart, and bowel sounds.



Photo credit Rivka Gutman

Prior to engaging with students, an SP is sent a scenario that provides the patient's medical and social history, the situation and how it will unfold; it details how the SP should respond to questions and interventions. Although the SP is given a reasonable list of responses, they must be ready to answer ad lib to any of the students' questions and interventions. The SP must be keenly aware of what they can and cannot say, at what point in the scenario they must provide information, and when and if they can cue a student. The SP interactions are staged to lead the student to apply correct interventions, but if the SP leads the student down the wrong track, the intended learning can be affected. Therefore, the simulation facilitator reviews and practices with the SP to ensure consistency, especially when different actors are utilized for a scenario.

Following the nurse-patient interaction, the SP provides the student with feedback on their communication and empathy skills. Placing themselves in the role of a patient, an SP is in the unique position to experience the nurse patient interaction and to give the student constructive feedback. Feedback is given immediately following the scenario, in the first few minutes of the debriefing process.

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What the Actors are Saying

Most SPs are graduates from Concordia or Dawson's theatre schools who work in cinema and commercials. Others are retired from a variety of professions. The SPs we've worked with report a shared view: that acting for education rather than entertainment gives them a different sense of purpose. It allows them to sharpen their craft in a different way, one that involves interaction and improvisation.

Many SPs found the process rewarding, saying that "doing what [they] love to do helps the future nurse" and sharing that they wanted to "do a good job for the student so that the student would succeed." Most expressed how challenging it was "to encourage the student without helping them and giving away too much." One SP said, "I wanted to tell them to just do this... but I could not." A retired SP noted that it keeps her brain young and that helping students now will ultimately help her should she ever be in hospital. "If they learn through me, it will help us and them," she noted.

What the Students Are Saying

"You can't look and assess a robot. You notice more things and it's more realistic. I notice a hand movement, posture."



Photo credit Rivka Guttman

“I appreciate receiving feedback in debriefing directly from the patient as opposed to no feedback from a robot and only from the teacher.”

“Practicing with SPs helps my confidence because it makes me think how I would have communicated differently. I am able to pick up on things I don’t usually pay attention to, both in the patient and in myself.”

“The actors are so real that I realize what I lack in terms of caring. For example, I felt so nervous even though I was an observer. I realized that I can’t take care of my patient if I am so nervous. It helps me to assess myself and what I need to work on.”

“The SPs are amazing; they are right on point. It felt like we were talking with someone who was actually suffering the illness, we were able to see the side effects of the medication, the actor was really drooling.”

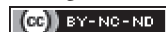
“I know the teachers would not assign me a patient who is hallucinating or aggressive; maybe I would have seen it from outside the room. But, with the SP in simulation I can see what it really looks like and I get hands on experience rather than being an observer. I was able to see what escalating behaviour looked like and then try out the techniques I learned in class.”

Conclusion

Simulations are labour-intensive productions. Although not presented on the big stage, they still require many of the same production staff, including scenario (screen) writers, a director, a talent agent, a production assistant, and a makeup and props coordinator.

A *Standardized Patient Handout* was created this year to provide consistency in information and expectations of the SP role. A copy can be obtained by contacting the author.

In the future, I hope to include actors in simulated multidisciplinary care in the roles of physician, social worker, and physiotherapist, among others.



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