Setting the Stage for Better Health Care

by Diane Kukich
Photo by Evan Krape

According to Cowperthwait, one important new direction for the program is patient safety. She cites hand-washing as an example. “Nurses tend to be very diligent about this,” she says, “but sometimes doctors are not. At the same time, a nurse may be intimi- dated about confronting a physician who has overlooked this basic precaution. Going through a scenario can teach nurses about the best way to handle a situation like this and empower them to actually do it in a clinical setting.”

Carlsen agrees. “With the standardized patient approach, there’s no cost when a grievous error occurs. But there’s something visceral about live. The lessons stick.”

The UD team has also contributed to the development of a set of interactive videos to teach communication skills to future health professionals across the country. Produced and marketed by the F.A. Davis Company in Philadelphia, the videos were filmed on the UD campus, with theatre minors playing roles in more than 20 scenes. The scripts were written by Cynthia Diefenbach, who has a doctorate in clinical psychology and is a member of the UD nursing faculty, and Kyle Phillips, who holds degrees in both theatre and music.

Although Phillips’ cross-training might seem unusual, faculty are starting to see over- lapping interests in the students who are in- volved in the UDP.

“He believes that the DEU, as a whole, is allowing us to learn from each other’s mistake and challenges,” Carlsen says. “It’s a whole new way of learning.”

The standardized patients play an important role in the program. Each patient is a professional actor or actress who is trained to play a specific role.

“Some of the theatre minors have switched to the nursing major after partici- pating,” Carlsen says, “and we’ve also seen students choose the theatre minor based on the opportunity it offers to join the program.”

Bethany Callaway planned to earn a degree in health behavior science and then enter an accelerated nursing program. Her plans changed after she participated in the UDUDP and chose to pursue an inter- national undergraduate nursing program.

“Every evening, I would sit down and write out my day’s experiences and how they related to the effect nurses have on their patients. They would see different emotions and how they would interact with them,” Carlsen says. “The experience was invaluable. It helped me realize that I want to be a nurse.”

“We believe that UD is the only school in the country taking this approach.” — Allan Carlsen

The standardized patients have been well-received by the students. “The patients are always helpful and accommodating,” Carlsen says. “They help us learn how to interact with people in a professional setting.”

The UDUDP is a unique program that combines the strengths of theatre and health sciences. It provides students with the opportunity to learn from professional actors and actresses while gaining valuable experience in the medical field.

The program is still new, but it has already proven its worth. The students have shown a high level of interest and participation, and the program is expected to continue to grow in the future.

In my experience

The standardized patients program taught me invaluable lessons that I don’t believe I could have learned anywhere else. Being a patient in a “hospital” room with all its equipment gave me a very realistic sense of the experience.

Perhaps the most important lesson that I will always remember is how it felt to be a patient. In medicine, the patient’s mood and willingness to cooperate can lead to better diagnosis and treatment. Since we had many nursing and physical therapy students rotate throughout the day, I got to experience many different ways of treatment. Even as an actor and not a real patient, I still felt the difference when I was a nurse, for example, held my hand and asked me if I was doing well. I felt like a human being and some- one that was cared for.

So I made a decision to spend more time with people who I now consider my good friends. I realized that I couldn’t help them to heal with only medical knowledge but also compassion and love. I have long been interested in the mind-body connection, so I am taking a year off after graduation to travel, I plan to gain better understand- ing of people and a better sense of culture. I want to open my eyes to the variation within the world.

I got a willingness to “see the world” in a new way. I learned to appreciate the differences and the beauty of each culture. I want to open my eyes to the variation within the world.

Most important, I believe that I have gained a new outlook on life. I have learned to be patient and understanding, and to appreciate the small things in life.

In conclusion, the standardized patients program was a valuable experience that has taught me many important lessons. I am grateful for the opportunity to have been a part of this program and I will carry these lessons with me throughout my life.”

Being a “patient” opens future doctors’ eyes to the importance of compassion.

Editor’s Note: Sephali Sadighi Highgatn graduated from the University of Delaware earlier this year, with a degree in biology and a minor in theatre.
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Photev by Evan Kopee

When Amy Cowperwait finished nursing school, she found herself wishing she could have been more prepared for what lies ahead. "I didn't know what it was like to be a patient," she says. Twenty years later, Cowperwait, now nurse simulation center coordinator in the University of Delaware School of Nursing, has found a way to give her students the empathy-developing experience they need.

UD's Standardized Patient Program (UDSP), a collaboration between the College of Health Sciences and the Department of Theatre, is a unique way to prepare students for their roles as health care professionals. With this approach, individuals are trained to portray patients and family members so that students can practice their skills as taking medical histories and doing physical exams.

Students encounter a variety of health scenarios and must adapt as they interact with the actors and fellow students in the simulation. Many of the simulations have been developed by the actors and students themselves to ensure that the experiences are as realistic as possible.

 UD's distinctive approach to the standard patient concept is that the actors are not professionals—they're undergraduate theatre majors.

The resulting scenarios develop in a very dynamic way, with the health sciences and theatre students interacting with each other and providing feedback in an unscribed give-and-take. "We believe that UD is the only school in the country taking this approach," says Allan Carben, undergraduate advisor and coordinator in the theatre department. "A few other institutions are using graduate theatre students as standardized patients, but here theatre students are central to the approach we're taking and the results we're seeing.

"Better communication is key to better health care," says Kathleen McShea, dean of the College of Health Sciences. "The quality of our health care is directly connected to how we present ourselves to medical professionals. That's why this program is so valuable not only to the health sciences students but to the theatre students as well. They're learning how to be better patients."

And now the program offers a critical opportunity for the students to learn how to work together. While the program has so far included just nursing and physical therapy students from the health sciences school, plans are to phase in other disciplines, including athletic training, medical technology, exercise science and nursing.

"The next generation of health care professionals and leaders will be required to work in teams," McShea says. "Our standardized patient program provides that experience, with the patients as an integral part."

The addition of family members further complicates the dynamic and enhances the realism of the scenarios.

"In a pediatric case, for example, you might have not only a child in pain but also one parent who is hysterical while the other has completely shut down," Cowperwait says. "Our nursing students are much better prepared for the clinical experience now, since they've already dealt with situations like this through the standardized patients program.

According to Cowperwait, one important new direction for the program is patient safety. She cites hand washing as an example. "Many nurses tend to be very diligent about this," she says, "but sometimes doctors are not. At the same time, a nurse may be intimated about approaching a physician who has overlooked this basic precaution. Going through a scenario can teach nurses about the best way to handle a situation like this and empower them to actually do it in a clinical setting."

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Although Phillips' cross-training might seem unusual faculty are starting to see overlapping interests in the students who are involved in the UDSP. "Some of our theatre majors have switched to the nursing major after participating," Carben says, "and we’ve also seen students choose the theatre minor based on the opportunity it offers to join the program.

Bethany Callaway planned to earn a degree in health behavior science and then enter an accelerated nursing program. Her plans changed after she participated in the UDSP, and she is now studying to be a theatre major. "I found the UDSP's traditional undergraduate nursing program, "Callaway planned to earn a degree in health behavior science and then enter an accelerated nursing program. Her plans changed after she participated in the UDSP, and she is now studying to be a theatre major. "I found the UDSP's traditional undergraduate nursing program, 'Isn’t it time we faced the reality that nurses have on their patients. They’re scared."

"Our students who have been seriously injured or hospitalized, said one student, ‘I had to come to grips with the fact that I could end up in one of those situations and how I’d feel.’ She was able to tell when the nurses wanted to be heard or whether they really cared about me as a ‘patient.’ I think patients deserve the best care, and it’s not just by way of machismo or being a tough guy."

Based on proving interest in the subject, the team recently developed an interdisciplinary elective course, HealthCare Communi- cation. Open to all undergraduates, the course incorporates film, text, observation, improvisation and experiential learning to prepare students for their roles in various health care settings. UD's clinical partners have recently become interested in the Standardized Patient Program as well. Nemours/A.I. du Pont Hospital for Children is planning to imple- ment the approach in training first-year pe- diatric emergency fellows, and Christiana Care Health System is applying it with third- and fourth-year medical residents.

' ‘Standardized patients will provide our clinicians with unique educational interven- tions and allow for direct feedback that will enhance interpersonal and communication skills,’ says Dr. Maria Diaz of the Division of Emergency Medicine at Nemours/ A.I. du Pont Hospital for Children.

At Christiana Care, Dr. Tabassum Salam has been involved in the education of physi- cians-in-training and medical students for over 10 years. "I am very excited to have a novel modality with which to teach communication skills and the art of working in multidisciplinary teams," he says. "The simulated scenarios will make the clinical cases feel very real for the learners, and they will get to practice skills that just cannot be taught in a traditional classroom format.

The program is still new, but little data has been collected at this point. However, evaluations indicate that the approach is 'eye opening' and ‘revolutionary.

"I think the UDSP exemplifies the transformative experience that we believe our students should have at the University of Delaware," Carben says.

In my experience

The standardized patients program taught me invaluable lessons that I don’t believe I could have learned anywhere else. Being a patient in a ‘hospital room’ with all its equipment gave a very realistic sense to the experience.

Perhaps most important is that I will always remember how it felt to be a patient. In medicine, the patient’s mood and willingness to cooperate can lead to better diagnoses and treatment. Since we had many nursing and physical therapy students rotate throughout the day, I got to experience many different ways of treatment. Everyone was an actor and not a real patient. I still felt the difference when I was a nurse, for example, held my hand and asked me how I felt. It was a human being and some- one that was cared for.

So I made a decision to spend more time with people who I could give care to, so that I could help them to heal with not only medicine but also compassion and love. I have long been interested in the mind-body connection, so I am taking a year off after graduation to travel, to gain a better understanding of people and a better sense of cultural differences. I want to open my eyes to the variation within the world.

After I return, I plan to attend Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, where I hope to put my new knowledge to good use. — Sepehr Sadighzadeh

Editor’s Note: Sepehr Sadighzadeh graduated from the University of Delaware earlier this year, with a degree in biology and a minor in theatre.