



Pinar Topsever, MD  
topsever@gmail.com

## ***45 – Using Drama Students/Actors as Simulated Patients in Medical Education: Sharing the Experience of a Clinical Communications Skills Course***

PARKAN Sirin, DINC Demet,  
ONGANER Efe, TOPSEVER Pinar.  
Acibadem University School of  
Medicine, Department of Family  
Medicine, Istanbul, TURKEY

New learning styles and approaches for medical education are always an important issue in research. Skills training with simulated patients (SPs) is controlled, the student's experience is free of unexpected and unknown variables, and her/his responses and actions can be recorded and evaluated regarding performance by faculty, fellow- students, as well as the student her-himself (reflection) according to the targeted learning outcomes.

Usually SPs are used for training of “soft skills” like clinical communication skills (patient-centred history taking and physical examination techniques) without embarrassment in front of ill patients and without concern of tiring, harming patients or aggravating their feelings. SPs have also been used for discussing all the aspects of diseases and related prognoses. (1) There are also studies exploring the effect of communication skills training on the process and outcome of care associated with patients' emotional distress (2), difficult patient encounter situations, and delivering bad and sad news (3, 4, 5). However, most of the research is about skills training for delivering bad and sad news via simulated patient encounters (5, 6, 7), whereas, little is known about techniques to train advanced communication skills for mastering difficult patient personalities.

The curriculum of Acibadem University School of Medicine (ACU SoM) features a professionally programme entitled “Clinical Medicine and Professional Skills (CMPS)” which runs throughout the first 3 years of undergraduate medical education. This program consists of seven courses: Clinical Communication Skills, Health and Society, Medical Ethics and Humanities, Research in Health, Procedural Skills, First Aid and Basic Life Support, and Comprehensive Medical Practice.

CMPS aims to provide an overall introduction to the medical profession within an innovative and interactive, creative learning environment; creating the link between professional skills and competence, scientific knowledge, humanistic approach and clinical practice of high ethical and clinical standards. Facilitating the competence of analytic reasoning and the attitude of self-directed, life-long learning is another target of the program which should enable the formation of an efficient health care professional of high scientific and moral standards. CMPS also provides ample community-based educational opportunities for learning about social and economic aspects of ill health, health services in the community, and common health and related problems.

The learning outcomes of the program are basic professional and clinical skills (first aid, basic medical procedures, history taking and physical examination), knowledge about epidemiology, basic research skills, effective and patient-centred clinical communication skills, insight into the relationship of health with societal, political and environmental factors, awareness about the importance of principles of ethical conduct and humanities for “good clinical practice”. It aims to equip the students with competencies of a comprehensive and biopsychosocial approach to individuals and their health conditions, awareness of the responsibilities and boundaries of the medical profession, the sense of responsibility for- and a proactive attitude to contribute to the principle of health as a right, and equity in health care. Methodologically, SP encounters are used in the courses of Clinical Communication Skills (CCS), Advanced Communication Skills (ACS) and Comprehensive Medical Practice (CMP).

The first year CMPS program starts with an introduction to CCS, including basics of communication (verbal/non-verbal). Teaching-learning methods used are drama and role plays with students, interactive multi-media sessions and kick-off or wrap-up lectures, no SP encounters yet. Empathy and patient-centred approach are the final subjects addressed in year one, finishing up with an introduction to the Calgary Cambridge Guide.

The students have their first SP encounter in year two, during the CMPS CCS, where they have the opportunity to gain and train patient-centred routine investigation skills; i.e. history taking and physical examination via encounters with SPs. The SP sessions are recorded in the clinical simulation centre which offers the opportunity for students to reflect on their individual performance, as well as receiving structured feed-back from tutors or peers.

In the third year, the CMPS program features the Advanced Communication Skills (ACS) course, where training with SPs is used for developing skills to manage difficult patient encounters, breaking bad news situations, as well as initiating behaviour change (with motivational interviewing techniques). The topic of “managing difficult patient encounters situations” was highlighted during the WONCA Istanbul 2015 Meeting, with the aim of sharing experiences and ideas with colleagues and students to explore new approaches.

In the medical literature, there is more experience and research on SP encounters regarding skills training for breaking bad news, but much less about managing “difficult” patient encounters. The reasons for that are probably the difficulty of building a structured guideline for specific micro-communication skills proving useful during difficult patient encounters. “Difficult” patient encounter situations can come in many different ways and in a wide range from angry-aggressive or manipulative, to addictive patients, from homosexual to a strictly religious patients. The state-of-the-art approach is still based on person-(patient) centredness. The patient-centred clinical method is emphasized in the structured skills check-lists used for teaching-training and assessment of performance in the CCS, ACS and CMP course of CMPS. The individual reflection and structured tutor feed-back sessions which are held with the students after the SP encounters aim to round up the learning experience.

There are different scenarios used portraying “difficult” patients, which are updated yearly, with the aim to cover all possible difficult personality types. Before the sessions with the students, the SPs are trained and instructed on how to portray the specific patient personalities in the different scenarios. The SP pool is consisting of professionals, who have undergone /are undergoing formal acting training.

There is ongoing controversy and discussion on the topic of SPs preferably not having professional acting back-ground (8) due to risk of overacting and projecting negative healthcare experiences to the performance. According to ACU SoM CMPS program experience, however, acting experience of SPs has proven useful, especially in terms of advanced communication skills training for medical students, as realistically enacting sentiments requires a certain level of self-awareness which comes with acting experience.

With the work-shop at WONCA Europe in Istanbul, we intended to demonstrate and share the teaching and skills training practice and experiences from the CMPS program at Acibadem University School of Medicine and discuss with our colleagues from different institutions, countries and cultural backgrounds for possibilities to enhance and improve structured skills training techniques and material especially for developing skills to manage difficult patient encounters and breaking bad news with SP encounters. Along with other topics, the discussion whether professional acting back-ground is an asset or a flaw for SPs working with medical students is an interesting one to reflect on further.

Definitely, there is a need for more research about effective techniques to train communication skills for managing difficult doctor-patient encounter situations, particularly about micro-techniques regarding using SPs for this purpose.

### **Take Home Message**

- Person (patient)-centred approach should guide the learning outcomes of a clinical communication skills course
- Simulated Patient (SP) encounters can be used for training medical students to adopt a person-centred approach when communicating with patients
- A professional acting back-ground for SPs can be an asset for specific learning outcomes like advanced communication micro-skills
- There is a need to develop a consensus on effective micro-skills to manage difficult patient encounters

### **Original Abstract**

<http://www.woncaeurope.org/content/4023-assessing-medical-students-communication-skills-using-drama-students-simulated-patients>

### **References**

1. Barrows H.S.: Simulated patients in medical education. *Canad.Med.Ass.Journal*, 98: 674-76, 1968.
2. Roter D.L et al.: Improving physician's interviewing skills and Reducing patients emotional distress. A randomized clinical trial. *JAMA Internal Medicine*. 155: 1877-1884 , 1995.
3. Feldmann M.D.et al.: Role of behavioral Medicine in primary care. *Current Opinion in Psychiatry*. 25: 121-27, 2012.
4. Cronauer et al. : These de doctorat, Universite de Neuchatel. How physician affected communication skills are related to patient characteristics and outcomes: sympathy and awareness in the spotlight, 2013.
5. Wakefield A. et al. : Learning together: use of simulated patients with nursing and medical students for breaking bad news. *International Journal of Palliative Nursing*.9: 32-38, 2003.
6. Vail L. et al. : Hospital consultants breaking bad news with simulated patients: an analysis of communication using the Roter Interaction Analysis System. *Patient Education and Counseling*. 83: 185-94, 2011.
7. Linear A. et al.: Is it possible to improve residents' breaking bad news skills&quest; A randomized study assessing the efficacy of a communication skills training program. *British Journal of Cancer*. 103: 171-77, 2010.
8. Kurtz SM, Silverman JD, Draper J (2005) *Teaching and Learning Communication Skills in Medicine* (Second Edition). Radcliffe Publishing.