

# Standardized Patient Simulation for a Graduate Nursing Program

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## ABSTRACT

Clinical placement for nurse practitioner (NP) students is difficult due to an increase in demand for clinical sites and qualified preceptors, and the nursing faculty shortage. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing supports the use of simulation with standardized patients as an adjunct to traditional clinical placement for NPs. In this article, we describe an innovative standardized patient simulation experience implemented in a family NP master's of science program. The purposes of this experience were to provide alternative clinical opportunities and formative feedback for NP students and to identify gaps in students' diagnostic reasoning. Lessons learned through this experience are included.

**Keywords:** alternative clinical, NP education, simulation, standardized patients, unfolding case study

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Opportunities for clinical experiences for students in advanced practice nursing programs are becoming more and more challenging due to a number of factors. An increase in the demand for nurse practitioner (NP), medical doctor (MD), doctor of osteopathy, and physician assistant student clinical placement has led to competition for available clinical sites and qualified preceptors. In combination with the nursing faculty shortage, it is becoming increasingly difficult to provide suitable clinical experiences for NP students.<sup>1,2</sup> As a result, educators must consider alternative means of providing essential clinical experiences that adequately prepare NP students for their future roles and for effective formative and summative evaluation of NP students in the clinical setting.

The use of simulation as an alternative or supplement to traditional clinical experiences is gaining interest. The National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN) asserts that simulation includes screen-based/PC-based simulation, virtual patients, partial task trainers, human patient simulators (HPS), and standardized patients (SPs).<sup>3</sup> In the last decade, scenarios using HPS have emerged as an integral part of clinical experience in undergraduate nursing education. In the seminal 2014 study sponsored by the NCSBN, simulation was defined as an activity or event replicating clinical practice using scenarios,

high-fidelity mannequins, medium-fidelity mannequins, SPs, role-playing, skills stations, and computer-based critical thinking simulations.<sup>4</sup> Further, findings from the NCSBN study supported that simulation including high-fidelity HPS produces outcomes equivalent to traditional clinical experiences, if substituted for up to 50% of the clinical experience, when best-practice principles are applied.<sup>4</sup>

The American Association of Colleges of Nursing has identified 2 forms of high-fidelity simulation: HPS and SPs.<sup>1</sup> SPs predate HPS in medical education, dating back over 30 years.<sup>5</sup> In fact, earlier definitions of simulation in medical, nursing, and allied health care fields included "A simulation is a type of role play where one of the participants is the standardized patient. Standardized patients can be real patients or actors...trained to simulate a scenario with a student..."<sup>6(p289)</sup>

The American Association of Colleges of Nursing supports the use of simulation with SPs as a viable adjunct to traditional clinical placement for NPs, and asserts it seems reasonable that simulation would be beneficial for NP education.<sup>1</sup> SP clinical experiences afford students the opportunity to develop diagnostic reasoning skills and to bridge the gap between academia and practice, and can be developed to include realism and technology.<sup>7</sup> Although increasing use of this educational strategy with graduate-level students has been called for, there are few reports

detailing the methods, opportunities, and challenges of SP use in NP education.

In this investigation we describe the development of an SP simulation clinical experience for use in a family nurse practitioner (FNP) master's of science in nursing program. The purposes of this SP clinical experience were to provide alternative clinical opportunities for NP students; offer meaningful formative feedback of students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes in the last semester of the program; and identify gaps in teaching and learning as they related to diagnostic reasoning.

### STANDARDIZED PATIENT SIMULATION CLINICAL EXPERIENCE OVERVIEW

The setting for the SP clinical experience was a private nursing school at a large university in the United States. The simulated experience was implemented in a state-of-the-art clinical skills laboratory in the nursing school building. Three fully equipped patient examination rooms, each resembling an office or clinic setting, were used for the experience. One computer lab was available for student electronic documentation of patient encounters. A room for debriefing students following completion of the experience also was used.

An unfolding case study approach was selected as the basis for the SP clinical experience because it would provide a good means of meeting the objective of the experience. An unfolding case study is one in which the patient situation or condition changes over time, in an unpredictable manner, necessitating re-evaluation and development of a new or revised plan of care by the learner on each subsequent encounter with the patient.<sup>8</sup> Unfolding case studies offer a learning experience within which current clinical standards and guidelines can be incorporated while focusing on expected competencies and outcomes of student learning.<sup>8</sup> This type of scenario provided a flexible opportunity to gauge student critical thinking, diagnostic reasoning, and clinical judgment, which are essential skills for an NP. The unfolding case study approach also offered the opportunity for students to see a patient in follow-up, thereby allowing students to evaluate the effectiveness of the initial plan of care prescribed for that patient, and to revise the plan as the scenario

progressed. In typical clinical placements, students may not be afforded an opportunity such as this due to the often limited time spent in each clinical setting.

For the simulated experience, the use of SPs appeared to offer the most realistic encounter for students while allowing for small variations in the plan of care that might be prescribed for the patient by different students. This had the potential to impact the unfolding nature of the case. The use of SPs for simulated experiences is well-noted and supported in the literature.<sup>9,10</sup> SPs are persons who follow a scripted scenario and who present in a consistent manner as patients with specific health or medical conditions during an educational or evaluative experience in nursing.<sup>11</sup> The use of SPs allows students to demonstrate communication and clinical skills in obtaining a health history, completing a physical examination, and outlining a plan of care. SPs portray psychological aspects and emotional aspects in a way that HPS cannot. Because the best way to replicate a human being is with a human being, SPs were judged to be the best approach.<sup>10</sup>

### SCENARIO DEVELOPMENT AND DESCRIPTION

The learning objectives for the project were based on current clinical practice guidelines for the various patient conditions in the unfolding case, the "Domains and Core Competencies of Nurse Practitioner Practice," outlined by the National Organization of Nurse Practitioner Faculties,<sup>12</sup> and the FNP program outcomes. The unfolding case scenarios were developed and consistent with the "INACSL Standards of Best Practice: Simulation," outlined by the International Nursing Association for Clinical Simulation and Learning.<sup>13</sup> Consideration was given to providing realistic scenarios that may be encountered in a primary care setting.

The unfolding scenario was developed to provide students 3 separate, simulated, time-lapsed, sequential encounters with the same patient and to have the opportunity to document findings and a plan of care after each encounter. The unfolding case focused on health conditions that had been identified as being commonly noted by students in their clinical encounters with adults and for which various differential diagnoses may be possible, offering challenges to the students. The initial scene in the unfolding case

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