STANDARDIZED PATIENTS IN MEDICAL EDUCATION

Background
As a fundamental part of becoming a doctor, medical students must learn basic history taking and physical exam skills. Once these skills are learned, however, opportunities to assess the skills and ensure that students are at least minimally competent must exist. Therefore, for both formative and summative purposes, the Standardized Patient program was implemented as a method for safe, structured learning, feedback, and assessment.

Goal
The goal of using Standardized Patients in medical education is to provide a highly realistic learning resource for students that helps them to develop skills in interviewing and examination techniques. Standardized patients participate in skill demonstration and instruction, practice and experience, and evaluation and assessment.

Implementation
Standardized Patients (SPs) are used in a variety of ways. SPs are trained to portray specific cases that address the learning objectives of a particular course. In addition, they are trained to give specific, behaviorally based feedback to learners about their performance. SPs are used for both learning activities (e.g. Introduction to Medical Interviewing) and summative assessment (e.g. a 10 station Observed Structured Clinical Exam (OSCE) at the end of third year).

All students spend approximately 77 hours in standardized patient instruction and assessment across the four-year curriculum. Last year, students participated in approximately 15,000 SP encounters.

Courses
Introduction to Medical Interviewing: 7 four-hour sessions on learning the basics of interviewing patients
Advanced Medical Interviewing: 4 three-hour sessions learning more advanced interviewing techniques
Normal Physical Exam: Opportunity to practice physical exam techniques on patients of the opposite gender; also an assessment of their normal physical exam skills
Gynecological and Genitourinary Exams: Opportunities to learn correct technique before practicing on actual patients
Basic Science of Care: Problem-solving around health care systems issues
Tobacco Cessation Workshop: 1 three-hour session learning and practicing to counsel patients on smoking cessation
Geriatric Teaching session: Focused three-hour session on taking a history and assessing elderly patients for cognitive impairment, falls, health screening
Psychiatry Teaching: Two-hour session teaching students to interview patients with specific psychiatric disorders
Family Medicine Alcohol Workshop: One-hour session where students assess patients for alcohol use (SBIRT) and counsel them to quit drinking.
Advanced Clinical Skills Course: Half-day workshop on honing clinical skills during focused patient encounters, comparable to those on the Step 2-CS examination
Clinical Skills Tutorials: Five half-day sessions for 4th year students, aimed at improving clinical skills during focused patient encounters

Assessments
Clinical Skills Assessment: Second year observed exam of student taking a complete history and physical
Advanced Physical Exam OSCE: Second year 4-station structured exam provides opportunities for students to perform focused histories and physicals
Combined Ambulatory Medicine and Pediatrics Clerkship OSCE: End of clerkship exam on common
Impact
Standardized Patients are an important and flexible learning resource for teaching and evaluating history taking and physical examination skills across the curriculum. Because a particular patient problem or scenario is readily available, and can be adjusted to meet the needs of the learner, educators can create an optimal learning environment, based on the learner’s experience and the objectives of the session. Students can learn and practice interviewing and physical exam skills in a safe setting without risking the comfort or safety of a real patient. Students also have the opportunity to work in emotionally charged situations, such as domestic violence, angry patients, or bad-news cases without risk. Testing learner’s patient skills using Standardized Patients ensures a more predictable, reliable, and fair assessment. And because the Standardized Patient is trained to provide feedback on the learner’s professional manner, attitude, and interpersonal skills, feedback can be immediate and from the patient’s point of view. Standardized Patients supplement instruction and assessment in a multitude of ways and provide an invaluable resource for the clinical curriculum.