

Clinical Skills Education and Assessment Center

Standardized Patient Encounters Advance Student Education

College center prepares students for a successful transition from clinical skills practice to medical practice

With a short knock and a courteous hello, Kene Ntukogu, Med 4, opens the door to a scenario that will soon become a routine part of his daily life.

As a resident in Internal Medicine, Ntukogu will cross dozens of patient exam thresholds each day, meeting strangers with a variety of symptoms who want to know the source of their discomfort and their best treatment options.

But this March, as Ntukogu entered an examination room in the OSU Clinical Skills Education and Assessment Center, he knew his "patient" would recover quickly even without his diagnosis. His goal today was to perfect his own patient care skills for the upcoming United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) — Clinical Skills test. A requirement for medical licensure as of June 2004, this all-day practical exam tests students' medical knowledge, clinical skills and patient communication.

PATIENT FEEDBACK

In fact, Ntukogu was relying on standardized patient Lauren Clark, a middle-aged woman who presented with abdominal pain of unknown origin, to provide feedback that would help him hone his physician-patient skills.

Clark, like more than 75 OSU College of Medicine and Public Health (COMPH) standardized patients, learns the symptoms of several diseases and plays a pre-set character type, so that students can develop expertise in the art of patient examination. In addition to relaying symptoms and patient history information, patients like Clark provide the personality, emotions and response patterns of real patients.

"The majority of the time, I am playing myself with symptoms," she explains. However, she smiles when she recalls all of her "diseases" and diverse behaviors as a standardized patient in the past year — a rash, headaches, stomach pain, tobacco and alcohol use, substance abuse, and even a sexually transmitted disease. Some of the patients she portrayed were naïve; others were non-compliant.

"You don't really need a lot of medical knowledge, but you do have to be able to memorize and improvise if the answer to a student's question hasn't been provided," says Clark, who was a theater major in college. Like a good mystery novel, the standardized patient drops clues throughout the 15-minute exam so that the attentive student can zero in on the correct diagnosis.

"The really difficult part is holding back — not offering information that isn't asked for by the student," she adds.

After each encounter, Clark assesses the student's performance by marking a checklist for communication and rapport as well as for appropriate exam skills and diagnosis. Encounters can be viewed through a two-way mirror and are also videotaped, so that the student can review the exam alone or with an instructor.

INSTANT REPLAY

The video replay is extremely valuable, says Ntukogu.

"It was a big help seeing myself on tape, so that I could learn my weaknesses and improve," he explains. "Communication is very important because patients need to feel comfortable so they will tell you everything. If they keep things to themselves, this could affect the diagnosis and treatment they receive."



Standardized patients such as Lauren Clark provide students like Kene Ntukogu realistic physician-patient experiences for better transition to medical practice.

Like a professional athlete studying game films, Ntukogu had watched the tape of his earlier patient exam. He checked to make sure that he focused on the patient, had good eye contact and body language, organized his questions and phrased in them simple language, and spoke in a friendly manner. In addition to observing standard hygiene practices such as hand washing, he paid attention to other physician-patient relationship issues, such as asking before touching the patient.

After examining Clark, Ntukogu provided her with a verbal summary of the exam, explaining further testing or treatment needed, and completed a written report — just as he will when he begins his residency in July.

Ntukogu believes the Clinical Skills Center is a great training ground for future physicians.

"You can read everything that's available, but you really have to practice with patients," he says.

As preparation for his USMLE test, Ntukogu also examined Larry Gardner, a middle-aged male who presented with breathing difficulty. For retiree Gardner, role-playing patients and working with OSUMC faculty, staff and students is a part-time job with a purpose.

"I enjoy being with the young people and there's value in doing this. This helps students develop expertise in interviewing before they start practicing medicine," he says.

— Sara Calvey, program coordinator, Clinical Skills Education and Assessment Center, contributed to these articles.

EDUCATORS TAP CENTER'S LEARNING POTENTIAL

Patient encounter experiences are just one feature of the Clinical Skills Education and Assessment Center located in the basement of the Prior Health Sciences Library.

The dream of OSU College of Medicine and Public Health (COMPH) educators for more than 15 years, the center opened in September 2004 with 14 patient encounter rooms, recording capabilities and observation areas, a procedures training area with high technology simulators and equipment, videoconferencing capabilities, wireless access for PDAs and laptops, and other education and assessment technologies.

"We have the ability to simulate actual patient-care experiences," says Daniel Clinchot, MD, associate dean for Clinical Education and Outreach and the center's medical director. "Through high quality clinical education and highly accurate assessment of skills and procedures, we can improve the quality of health care for our community by improving physician-patient interaction."

The center is used for all levels of medical education and training — from first- and second-year students practicing doctor-patient relationship, history-taking and physical examination skills, to interns and residents practicing advanced skills such as intubation and surgical techniques, adds Carol Hasbrouck, assistant dean and center director.

Third- and fourth-year students access the center for specific procedure training and in preparation for the USMLE-Clinical Skills test.

Although widely used by students and physicians, the center's potential is just beginning to be tapped, Clinchot says.

"Ohio State has a rich tradition as innovators of quality medical education. The technological capabilities of the Clinical Skills Center offer untold opportunities to advance education and training programs," he says.