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Subject: Sam is Working with "Standardized Patients"



WORKING WITH STANDARDIZED PATIENTS



Sam's work with medical actors, called "standardized patients", will help her prepare for her work with real patients

WHAT ARE STANDARDIZED PATIENTS?

Standardized patients, also called medical actors, are people who pretend to be patients so that medical students like Sam can learn how to work with real people in a safe way. The

Doctoring 2 course during Sam's second year helps her develop the skills and knowledge she needs to work in a real-world clinical setting, and standardized patients provide this in a controlled teaching environment, so that students can learn how to examine patients. Standardized patients are trained to play a patient in a consistent, or "standardized" way. They know their "disease" and "symptoms," and they know how to present them convincingly during a simulated patient encounter. Standardized patients also deliberately present themselves as having specific moods, beliefs about medicine, religions, and educational backgrounds.

Sessions with standardized patients take place in a simulation center at the medical school which is designed to look just like a real clinic and has working instruments, lights, and examining tables. Students prepare for these sessions by studying how to take a good patient history and how to ask the right questions. They also practice such physical exam skills as listening to the heart, looking in the ears, and checking for reflexes.

Each session with a standardized patient is recorded on video. Meanwhile, Sam will be working with a small group called a "case-based session," which is student-led but has a faculty member present to help help as needed. During these sessions, she and other students will review together the videos of their time with standardized patients, sharing both strong points and suggestions for improvement. These small-group sessions help students learn from each other how to improve their skills with patients, as well as how to give and receive feedback.

HOW DO MEDICAL STUDENTS RESPOND TO STANDARDIZED PATIENTS?

For many students, their first few encounters with standardized patients are filled with feelings of self-doubt or nervousness. Even a student who would normally describe themselves as a "people person" can feel anxious the first few times. Students frequently self-monitor their behavior during the encounter, which helps them remember what they

need to do, but it can also lead to self-doubt or over-analysis: “Did I remember to ask about any family history of cancer? Did I listen to all the areas of the heart with my stethoscope? Did I ask when their nausea started?” While the use of actors is designed for safety and comfort; knowing that the person she is working with is acting can be stressful and inauthentic for Sam. The very nature of these sessions is awkward, but still require the care, knowledge, and self-confidence Sam will need in real-life medical experiences.

At the same time, students begin to feel excited and hopeful, since working with a standardized patient can feel like they are finally practicing what it will be like to be a real physician. Students begin to picture themselves as competent, compassionate physicians, enthusiasm builds, and this inspires them to practice more and study harder. A student might make a mistake during a physical exam, which makes them determined to practice harder, working through the correct questions and examinations over and over again. After a while, students begin to interact comfortably with standardized patients. They learn how to connect well with another person and how to be helpful to people from very different backgrounds. While in a controlled environment, this work is still very personal and energizing for Sam, giving her a glimpse into her future and providing a perfect chance to take stock of her developing sense of professional self.

The review and feedback sessions can produce a range of reactions. Some students find it hard to watch themselves on a video playback and feel embarrassed. The more they do it, however, the more comfortable they become. Hearing negative feedback from others can also make students feel defensive. Relationships in the review sessions typically develop over time, though, and students come to rely on each other and respect their feedback. Students sometimes even find it fun to talk freely about what they did well and what they feel they can improve upon, and appreciate how the process makes them all better doctors in the long run. Sam is starting to feel like a professional and having many new emotions about her journey to this point in her education.

HOW CAN I SUPPORT SAM WITH STANDARDIZED PATIENTS?

- Here are some questions to help you start a conversation with Sam about this experience:
 - So far, how do you like working with standardized patients?
 - What about it do you particularly enjoy?
 - How do you feel about the feedback sessions? Does it feel friendly and helpful? Does it feel fair?
 - Do you think working with standardized patients is helping you? In what ways?
 - Are there certain types of “patients” you like interacting with better than others? (This can help Sam start thinking about the type of specialty she would like to learn about in the future.)
 - Do you look forward to the feedback sessions after your patient interview? (Offer a listening ear so that you can have a better understanding about her experience.)
 - How does it feel when you are giving feedback to other members of the group? (She may enjoy it or dread it, but talking about it will help her process what she's feeling.)
 - Are there any colleagues you have connected with during these sessions?
 - What would perfect feedback look like to you?
- Offer to let Sam practice her interview with you. She may appreciate the opportunity to try out different ways of asking about physical complaints or family history, as well as getting honest feedback about what it feels like to be her patient (for example, let her listen to your heart using a stethoscope, or test the strength and mobility of your legs).
- Help Sam remember that her professor, her classmates, and especially the standardized patients that she meets want to help her become a better doctor.
- If Sam feels extremely nervous about encounters with standardized patients, encourage her to discuss this with her professor before the scheduled encounter.

- Remind Sam that mistakes are okay and a necessary part of the learning process, and offer encouragement about how much she has already completed.
- Tell Sam, specifically and genuinely, how proud you are of her. Acknowledging your very real experience with Sam and all of the concrete progress she has made will make it easier for Sam to bring greater self-confidence into her standardized sessions.

LEARN MORE ABOUT STANDARDIZED PATIENTS

- [A Standardized Patient's Medical Journey – When Art Imitates Life](#) / Association of Standardized Patient Educators
- [Tips from a Standardized Patient](#) / Med School Tutors
- [Demand is high for pretend patients](#) / Washington Post