

Actors help future doctors hone bedside manners

Volunteers trained to observe and give feedback on NUS medical students' behaviour

Linette Lai

On some days, Ms Valerie Tan plays the patient. At other times, she is an anxious relative armed with questions about her sick family member. But whatever her role, she has one aim: to help future doctors improve their bedside manners.

Ms Tan, who is in her 50s, is one of a growing number of volunteers being hired by the National University of Singapore (NUS) to provide its students with a more realistic experience of working in a hospital.

These actors – there are 160 of them now – work at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine's Centre for Healthcare Simulation.

Opened in 2012, the centre's set-up mimics a real hospital with its own intensive care unit, labour ward and emergency room. It even has mannequins

which can be programmed to tremble, gasp and cry. But nothing beats working with live bodies and minds.

Centre director Suresh Pillai, giving the example of a woman who played the part of a patient with Parkinson's disease, said the fake patients have been getting better and better at their roles.

"She was so real that people thought she indeed had Parkinson's disease," he said. "The standards have been raised so high that the faculty is quite happy."

Those in charge hope that simulated training will play an even bigger part in the curriculum as it helps students hone soft skills like verbal communication, body language and eye contact.

Around 90 people have signed up for a recruitment drive on May 23 when 20 volunteers will be picked for the foundation training course to learn how to play the role of a patient.

There are even more advanced courses. For instance, around 20 volunteers have gone through a four-day course to learn how to accurately observe and give feedback on students' behaviour in the absence of a lecturer.

Associate Professor Nicola Ngiam, who coordinates the standardised patient programme, said: "They remind



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Ms Valerie Tan (centre) playing an anxious family member to give fourth-year NUS medical students (from left) Grace Fong, Ryan Ware Yeo, Ng Eeyang and Zebedee Wong, all 23, a taste of a real hospital scenario. The simulation is part of the curriculum.

students of the need to introduce themselves, explain their roles and ask how the patient wants to be addressed."

Most recently, six volunteers – including Ms Tan – were trained to teach students the basics of physical examination, using their own bodies as models.

Ms Tan joined the programme five years ago when simulated patients were used only during exams. Then, her skills were needed only about once a month.

Now, she goes to the centre three to four times a week, as simulation training is part of the formal curriculum. Ms Tan gets an allowance of around \$20 an hour.

The former IT operations manager, who quit her job to look after her 88-year-old mother, heard about the post through her niece, who is a medical student. She signed up as she felt that the bedside manners of doctors in hospital were not up to par.

"I've faced doctors whom I didn't like when my parents were in hospital – they don't even look at you when they

talk to you," said Ms Tan. "When my turn comes, I want my doctors to be more compassionate, to have more empathy and not act like robots."

Much of her advice focuses on strengthening students' communication skills.

The Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School and the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine at the Nanyang Technological University also use such volunteers.

Students told *The Sunday Times* that such live simulations help put a human face to their learning and give them a degree of realism lacking in tutorials.

"When it comes to simulation training, we face 'real' problems such as knowing how to respond to patients if we're not able to successfully carry out certain procedures, like intubation," said 23-year-old Zebedee Wong, a fourth-year medical student at NUS.

"Even bedside tutorials in the hospitals aren't able to bring us to that level of realism."

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