

TRAINING ROUNDS

Acting the Part

UPSTATE'S INTERNAL MEDICINE RESIDENCY PROGRAM USES THEATER ARTS TO HELP RESIDENTS IMPROVE COMMUNICATION.



Stephen J. Knohl, MD '97

Seven young adults stand in a circle in a practice room at Syracuse Stage early on a Thursday morning. They are concentrating on “standing well.”

“Your feet should belong to the ground and your head with the angels,” their instructor tells them.

They progress from standing well to walking well, with feet under pelvis, chest open, and shoulders back.

Next he has them back in a circle, “purposefully” passing a ball from one to another. “Face each other and look each other in the eye,” he admonishes. “Check yourself on how many times a day you catch yourself communicating to somebody sideways instead of giving them your full attention.”

The participants are all internal medicine residents at Upstate Medical University. They are taking direction from Stephen Cross, associate professor of acting at Syracuse University and artistic director of the Building Company Theater.

“Take a break from the way you think about learning,” Cross tells them. “These exercises are to get you to go to a different physical space and think about movement from a different perspective.”

This session on body movement and non-verbal communication is part of an Education Through Theater Arts (ETTA) program designed to help improve resident communication by making them aware of what their body language communicates to patients.

“This is an opportunity to think about how the body is involved in communication whether you want it to be there or not,” says Cross.

“When you walk into a room with a patient, they get your physical presence. Be aware of your body, how you are, how you move. It provides a lot of information.”

The residents participate in the exercises with varying levels of enthusiasm. One is clearly reluctant. Yet as the workshop progresses—requiring teamwork and coordinated movement—inhibitions fall. Everyone seems relaxed. Smiling.

Upstate’s internal medicine residents have been participating in the ETTA program since 2012, an initiative program director Steven J. Knohl, MD '97, introduced both as a way to integrate the arts into training as well as to augment the formal communication program, Learning to TALK (Treat All Like Kin).

Dr. Knohl launched Learning to TALK shortly after taking the reigns as program director in 2008. Residents participate in the longi-

Residents participate in a communications exercise, mimicking each other's behavior.





Residents build self-esteem by “risk taking” exercises that increase their trust in peers and in teamwork.

tudinal program once each year of their training. The sessions, held at Upstate’s patient simulation center, help residents work through challenging communications situations faced by physicians, including delivering news to a loved one about a dying family member, talking about cost conscious care, apologizing for a mistake, professionalism issues with colleagues, and teaching students.

At each annual session, residents work through three or four different scenarios with standardized patients as Knohl observes via live video in another room. Later, the residents discuss the challenges of those encounters with Knohl and then have the opportunity to watch their taped encounter to make their own evaluation of their performance. Residents also participate in additional sessions at the VA Medical Center while rotating there, focusing on issues specific to veterans.

In contrast, the ETTA experience is not necessarily medicine based, but provides techniques in nonverbal

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communication. “Things that can affect message intended versus message received,” he says.

Cross first created the ETTA program in his native Nova Scotia as a set of theater exercises that could be transferred to non-theater social service organizations.

When he moved to Syracuse to teach at SU a dozen years ago, he brought the concept with him and has worked with local organizations including the Onondaga County Justice Center, Oasis Senior Center,

school districts, and refugee and migrant worker advocacy centers.

So when Knohl called Syracuse Stage looking for a theater experience for his residents, ETTA seemed the perfect fit. Twice a month, small groups of medical residents from Upstate come to Syracuse Stage to participate in role-playing exercises, non-verbal communication, physical relaxation, teamwork, confidence and self-esteem.

When applied to medical residents, these exercises encourage participants to become more comfortable in using their bodies to express their ideas, more present and “in the moment” when attending to the needs of others, and more confident.

“I think they find they’re being challenged in a way they really had never experienced before and recognize that perhaps some of their body language, some of their biases, are sort of out there in a way they never appreciated,” says Knohl.

Cross believes the exercises challenge the residents’ way of thinking

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and learning. “We ask them to think in abstractions, which is not a typical part of their daily life,” he says. “Residents are typically consumed with figuring out what their attending wants of them, with not making a mistake. One of the first things we tell them is there is no right or wrong in the theater.”

But it’s not all fun and games either. As the link between patient satisfaction and safety becomes increasingly tied to reimbursement, the importance of good physician-patient communication is elevated.

Kay Frank, strategic program evaluator in the Department of Medicine, and Sue Henderson-Kendrick, Upstate director of graduate medical education, are working to quantify the impact of the experience, using a self reflection assessment after ETTA sessions and Press Ganey Patient Satisfaction scores at the resident clinic as a way to objectively measure the outcome of these experiences. “It’s ongoing but we’re seeing data showing positive improvement,” says Knohl.

Frank and Henderson-Kendrick have given poster presentations on the project at the Innovations in Medical Education Conference in Los Angeles and at the American Council for Graduate Medical Education Conference in Orlando, Florida, and are preparing a paper for the *Journal of Graduate Medical Education*.

Frank hopes to prove significance in ETTA through her doctoral dissertation by utilizing Press Ganey scores to pinpoint individual residents who may need more support with their communication skills. “For instance, we might see that Dr. Jane Doe does great with women 50 and older but isn’t so successful talking with men 18 to 30,” she explains. “We’re contemplating writing curriculum to help further support them before they go out into practice.”



Dr. Knohl facilitates a feedback session following a Learning to TALK simulated patient encounter.

She and Henderson-Kendrick are also hoping to expand the use of ETTA to other residency programs at Upstate. “Dr. Bradshaw from the Department of Neurology is coming to observe,” Frank says.

The experience has also impacted Cross. Last year, Building Company Theater produced a play based on the memoir *Prognosis Poor*, written by a family medicine doctor about the difficult realities of her residency experience. The production, directly inspired the ETTA/Upstate collaboration, was adapted for stage by Cross and performed both at Upstate for medical professionals and at a local theater company.

Cross ends today’s ETTA session with the Game of Power. He sets out six chairs, an oblong table, and a bottle of water and challenges those present to reconfigure the furniture to give one chair “more power” than the others.

There’s no hesitation. One by one, the residents jump to action,

coming up with a variety of tableau for the furniture and the bottle. “Which chair is most powerful? Why?” he asks. “What impact does that bottle make?”

From Syracuse Stage, the residents will head directly to clinic to see patients. “As you move through the day, be aware of your body and where you hold onto tension,” Cross advises the group. “Let this work resonate with you through the rest of day.” ■