J Nurs Care 2018, Volume 7
DOI: 10.4172/2167-1168-C3-071

Virtual simulation: incorporating innovation in the skills lab classroom

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Shifts in education delivery methods brought about by societal changes and advances in technology have created a demand for online education (Vogt and Schaffner, 2016). Transitioning traditional courses historically taught face-to-face with direct faculty involvement to the online environment, however, has proven challenging. Physical examination and differential diagnosis (PEDD), a required course for all Master of Science in nursing students, traditionally consisted of a didactic component introducing and differentiating typical normal from abnormal findings, and a weekly lab component providing students an opportunity to apply knowledge learned in the didactic component through the performance of a normal physical examination. In 2015, as part of a larger programmatic change, PEDD, along with many other courses, was to be migrated from a traditional format to an online format. The distance format would mean that students would no longer receive weekly direct faculty interaction, as the on-campus days would be limited to standardized patient experiences and skills performance check offs. To facilitate translation of learning with reduced faculty involvement, curriculum developers incorporated the use of virtual patient encounters to improve physical examination and differential diagnosis skills. Students completed case studies on computer simulated avatars arriving at a realistic ranked list of differential diagnoses. The students surveyed following the curriculum change reported higher levels of confidence with taking a history and performing a physical examination, both primary objectives for the course (Rutherford-Hemming, Nye and Coram, 2015). Rapid Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles allow the faculty to continue to enhance the usefulness of the simulation. Although PEDD currently uses only basic program functions, the program holds promise for inclusion in advanced clinical content education.