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Image provided by PNWU

A pair of Pacific Northwest University of Health Sciences osteopathic medical students listen as Karri Livingston, a simulated patient, explains her symptoms.

Patient actors at PNWU help train next generation of doctors

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YAKIMA HERALD-REPUBLIC

Karri Livingston remembers the "Seinfeld" episode with Kramer as a simulated patient. It still makes her laugh. She began as a simulated patient at Pacific Northwest University of Health Sciences in Yakima in 2020, so Livingston knows Kramer's impression is unrealistic. He dims the lights, smokes and exercises some narrative license as he hams it up for medical students trying to diagnose the health issue he's portraying.

Livingston gets to act; that's the fun part. But what she and the university's other simulated patients do is strictly defined and monitored by the university's Simulation Center housed in Butler-Haney Hall. It's serious business with important outcomes — helping medical

students sharpen their diagnostic skills and soften their bedside manner.

Also known as patient actors, standardized patients, sample patients, patient instructors or simply "SPs," simulated patients are people trained to realistically simulate a set of symptoms or problems along with the "patient's" history, physical findings and emotions.

Simulated patients also assess the medical students they interact with, specifically on students' efforts to get their "history," how students conduct physical examinations, communicate and provide counseling. They give useful feedback so medical students learn from their encounters with simulated patients.

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PATIENTS

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There are openings at PNWU, which has about 25 simulated patients after a pre-pandemic level of around 35, said Lisa Steele, executive director of the Simulation Center. She hopes to reach that pre-pandemic level next spring, which is a busier time. And when the new Student Learning Collaborative Building opens next year, the university will need even more simulated patients, she added.

"A huge piece of what the SP brings is the communication ... how to communicate, how to be human, how to engage," Steele said.

Acting experience could help but isn't required. Reliability is crucial along with the ability to take direction, stick to the standardization, accurately assess learners and provide them with effective feedback.

The job comes with a long list of job responsibilities and requirements. But there's extensive training and flexibility. Simulated patients are paid by the hour and choose the dates and cases they want to work, with the schedule typically made available a month in advance. Shifts are generally five hours or less.

There's a cadre of mentors to help; Livingston is a simulated patient mentor. All receive initial and annual training, with training and case materials available online.

"A lot of people will feel like,

"There's no way I could do this.' We're going to work with you and train you," Steele said. "We're asking you to do a role and we want to give you all the tools to do that role."

A way to give back

Livingston grew up in Yakima and has acting experience. "I was in a couple of plays at Eisenhower and in my 20s I did some Warehouse Theatre stuff," she said.

She worked for the state in human services for more than 30 years before becoming the early childhood education and assistance program director at EPIC, a nonprofit that provides preschool services. When Livingston retired from the organization in June 2020, she wanted to stay involved in the community and her husband, Ron, was still teaching at Toppenish High School. He's since retired.

"Then I saw the ad," Livingston said of the classified ad for simulated patients that the university occasionally runs in the Yakima Herald-Republic.

Their son Dr. Chase Livingston graduated from PNWU in 2015 and is a primary care provider at Kadlec in Richland. "He encouraged me to do it," she said, noting he had a good experience working with simulated patients and learning from the encounters.

The option sounded promising. Livingston applied and was interviewed. She also had to study some scripts and assessments, and do some early pretending, she said.

Once hired, "They really work with you," she said. "You're not thrown into a room right away."

Chelan Shepherd, assistant director of simulation-quality assurance, specializes in teaching standardized patients. Shepherd began as a simulated patient herself and advanced to watching student videos for assessment accuracy before helping develop the way students are assessed, according to an online biography.

She also assists with recruitment, and as an experienced actress "she helps us with the characters," Livingston said of Shepherd.

"You have an opening line you need to remember. There are case facts you need to remember," she said. "There's a lot of pain cases. Some of the cases are more complicated."

Simulated patient encounters with medical students mimic outpatient and inpatient situations. The encounters occur in the Simulation Center, which is laid out just like a medical office, with a waiting area and small exam rooms that mirror those in urgent care or family care doctor's offices.

"For some of the in-patient (cases) we're actually lying in bed," Livingston said. "It's really all about preparing and helping our student learners move out into the next phase."

After slowly working into taking a history of the simulated patient, medical students may listen to heart sounds, lung sounds, abdominal sounds; look in the "patient's" nose, ears, eyes, mouth;

take blood pressure; check reflexes and muscle strength and perform gentle osteopathic manipulative treatments. No blood or body samples are taken but these are hands-on examinations.

Along with completing a limited exam to diagnose the physical complaint, medical students must build empathy and rapport with their "patients." Students are assessed on their communication, respect and professionalism.

"Is the patient able to get out their story? That's the first thing we work with students on," Livingston said.

Invaluable hands-on learning

Simulated patients are briefed before each encounter and debriefed afterward, Livingston said. They get feedback on how they did from someone else who's watching the encounter, and hopefully their feedback for medical students is valuable and helpful.

"We try to really make it a positive experience for them," she added.

Livingston mentioned other activities where she portrays a person in various scenarios, such as for law enforcement training and practice interviews for medical students seeking a residency. "So you're a doctor interviewing a student," she said.

"We're also going to be doing some help with the physical therapy students," she said of the new program at PNWU. "We are doing some mental health cases, too."

Health care simulation is still

a relatively young industry with simulation efforts becoming more formalized in the last 20 years, said Steele, the PNWU Simulation Center executive director. An earlier example of people learning from simulation is flight simulation training for pilots, which began in the 1970s, she added.

"It's the only environment they're going to practice hands-on," Steele said. Simulation provides realism and challenges for students in a safe place where they can fail and learn, she said.

"Everybody fails. ... The more you're willing to fail and learn, the quicker you're going to succeed," Steele added.

For simulated patients, benefits can include greater awareness of their health and using it at medical appointments to be their own best health advocates, Steele said. "They're empowered with a different layer of knowledge," she said.

Simulation Center officials encourage a feeling of community among the simulated patients; some organize get-togethers, she said. "They just have that family-oriented feel. That community piece is huge," Steele said.

Overall, the experience "should be fun; it should be engaging; it should be enjoyable," she added.

Friends ask Livingston about her work as a simulated patient. She recommends it as a way to give back to the community and an opportunity to keep one's brain engaged.

"It's growth for me. It's challenging," she said.