

Human Connection Through Wi-Fi: Is it possible?

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all medical student assessments at Northeast Ohio Medical University (NEOMED) were redesigned to be performed virtually. This included my final standardized patient encounter. As nerve-wracking as it may feel to perform any aspect of the physical examination, it serves as a rite of passage for medical students transitioning into clinical rotations all around the country. My biggest concern was that my practice sessions and other standardized patient encounters had always occurred in person over the course of my first two years of medical school. Would I be able to successfully examine a patient virtually? Would I be able to connect with my patient to gather the sometimes personal, yet pertinent, details of medical history through a virtual platform? Knowing specific questions to review each organ system was not enough, and I knew I needed to identify more strategies to connect with patients.

Empathizing and connecting with my patient through a virtual platform proved to be much harder than I expected. I no longer had the privilege or security of directly facing my patients. Human connection and empathy were the original foundation of my history-taking and physical examination skills. Staring at my laptop screen, I practiced. I practiced using my eyes to gaze with compassion. I practiced keeping my lips sealed to motivate my patient to overcome their hesitations. I practiced using my hands to encourage my patient to open up and trust me with their problems. I practiced nodding my head to affirm my patient's feelings. Every part of my physical nature served to complement my purpose. This was not so that my encounter would feel scripted. Rather, I did not want my screen to numb my non-verbal communication skills just because I could hide behind it. On test day, I was able to virtually empathize with my patients by making eye contact, listening to their problems, and trying to absorb each part of the conversation and guide it in the direction the patient wanted. In the words of my standardized patient, "I felt you were truly listening and concerned about me as your patient. When you consistently looked at the screen [maintaining eye contact] ... I felt very important and that I had your 100% attention throughout the encounter."

During these unprecedented times, this feedback is promising. Although this encounter was different, I am grateful for the unexpected exposure to telemedicine—a service that most medical students are not typically exposed to. This experience has prepared me, as a future physician, to engage with patients via telemedicine as human connection is very much possible with an online platform. For patients who are unable to travel, the elderly, or those whose needs can be met via telemedicine, this is a great opportunity to receive the undivided attention and care of a physician. To start honing my skills during my medical school education has been invaluable as the use of telemedicine will only continue to grow in the field of medicine.