Deconstructing the Patient Experience: Cultivating Empathy in Health Professions Trainees through Experiential Learning
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Background:
Multiple studies demonstrate that empathy declines as students advance through medical school, with concerning implications for the patient-provider relationship. This might be partly due to educational experiences that lack individual patient context and student inexperience with functional limitations that patients must endure. We aimed to design an activity that simulates functional limitations of a common intervention with opportunities for reflection.

Methods:
We offered health professions students at Penn State College of Medicine a training session on volar arm splinting and asked them to wear the splint on their dominant arm for twenty-four hours. Students then completed a written reflection and participated in a group discussion about their experience. Students completed the Jefferson Scale of Empathy (JSE) before and after being splinted. We compared cohort scores before and after the intervention and performed a qualitative content analysis of written reflections and transcripts of the group discussions using Atlas.ti hermeneutics software.

Findings:
25 students (20 first-year medical, 4 junior and senior nursing, and 1 first year physician assistant) participated. Mean age was 24, and 72% were female. Total JSE scores increased from a mean of 114.7 pre-session to 117.6 post session (p=0.05). Similar increases were observed in JSE subscales representing the patients’ personal experience. Qualitative analysis revealed that the splints disrupted students’ lives with a level of authenticity that promoted contemplation of the patient role in ways that students did not anticipate. Students also described changes in thinking about patient compliance with therapy and the lived experience of illness. All study participants indicated a strong preference for greater incorporation of this learning modality into traditional didactics.

Discussion:
Our study demonstrates that even a simple simulation of sufficient authenticity can have a powerful effect for health professions students, and baseline empathy is amenable to positive change among a variety of students. Further work is needed to evaluate the longevity of increased empathy and how well it translates to behavioral change in clinical environments, including more thoughtful communication with patients and treatment plans that better anticipate the burden of planned interventions.