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Actors help future physical therapists

By **Jeff Samoray**, OU Web Writer

A 22-year-old man sits in a wheelchair with his right leg extended. It's obvious by the expression on his face and his sitting position that he's in pain. A team of three students in Oakland University's new **doctorate in physical therapy** (DPT) program convenes to discuss how best to teach the man how to walk on crutches – not a simple task.

One by one, each student introduces themselves to the man, who suffered an anterior cruciate ligament injury to his right knee, and demonstrates how to hold the crutches, walk to and sit on a physical therapy table 15 feet away, then push off the table and sit again in the wheelchair. The patient struggles and winces in pain but manages to complete the movements with the help of the student therapists.

The exercise is a valuable step for future physical therapists who will work in hospitals and clinics. The 32 DPT students from OU's Patient Management course use the techniques they've learned to work with patients who have various ailments. Only the "patients" really aren't patients at all – they're students from OU's **Department of Music, Theatre and Dance**.

"Each year, our first-year doctoral students practice the skills they learn on simulated patients. We're the only university in Michigan that offers these type of sessions," said Beth Black, adjunct instructor in physical therapy. "When we introduced this exercise four years ago, we called (Associate Professor of Theatre) Michael Gillespie and asked if some of his students could volunteer to portray real patients. I bring those students in at least a week ahead of time and spend an hour teaching them how a real patient would act. They get a script to follow, and I prepare them for any possible questions the PT students might ask."

The DPT students are presented with a brief report of each "patient's" condition, including a diagnosis and any restrictions, then work on helping patients learn to maneuver apart from their wheelchair. Instructors also are present at each session and frequently offer advice. The DPT students consistently report these sessions as their favorite of the semester, Black said.

"Usually we work on these sessions with each other in class, but we aren't always the best at faking an injury," said DPT student Beth Peruski. "It's really helpful to work with patients that we don't know. This will help us get ready for treating real patients in clinics. The students did a really nice job of acting. I didn't expect a 22-year-old to be so unstable (on crutches)."

Students like Phill Harmer, a senior musical theatre major, give the DPT students feedback at the conclusion of each session, helping them learn how to improve their treatment methods.

"I enjoy helping the physical therapy students out," said Harmer, who played the man with the ACL injury. "I find that they're very responsive to the feedback I give them. And it's not often that I get to play a guy with a knee injury."

DPT instructors also teach the theatre students by providing instruction on how a patient with a particular injury might move.

"One semester we had a theatre student who played the role of someone who had suffered a stroke," Black said. "One of the DPT students came up to me afterwards and said, 'I know they were acting, but that student really did have a stroke, didn't he?' That's how convincing his performance was."

Black also related an incident when a graduate from OU's theatre program called to ask for assistance on how to portray someone who walked with a limp for an upcoming performance. He came back to OU and the PT instructors helped him learn the movements.

"Admittedly, our DPT students gain the most from these sessions, but we try to make it a two-way street by giving back to the theatre students as much as possible," Black said.

The DPT students aren't graded during these sessions, which are used more for learning how to work with new patients. They also serve as a trial run for a future graded session, in which there will be no opportunity to get assistance from an instructor or classmate.

"Through these sessions we can learn from our own mistakes and become more comfortable," said DPT student Kelly Solomon.

"We can practice what we've learned on patients we aren't familiar with, just as we would in a real-world setting."

Visit OU's **Physical Therapy Program** Web site for information on programs, faculty, course schedules and student resources. For more information on OU's theatre courses, see the **Department of Music, Theatre and Dance** Web site.

SUMMARY

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