How Dummies And Drills Aid Medical Training

David Pogue

Ben Lynch, a fourth year medical student at the University of Oklahoma, entered the room, and introduced himself to "Mrs Gallagher." This young doctor has been sent to break some terrible news:

"The cancer's migrated further than we had hoped," Lynch said. "It's reached that point to where we can say that it's terminal."

The patient's response is emotional: "I know it will take my life when I'm ready, but I'm not ready. And there are -- I, I have plans!"

"I understand this is tough," Lynch said. "And it's okay to struggle with this, this news, okay?"

DeWayne Andrews, observing the interaction through a one-way mirror, reacts: "She's very good."

Fortunately, "Mrs. Gallagher" -- a.k.a. Beverly Rearden -- doesn't really have cancer. She's one of thousands of amateur actors hired by American medical schools to help future doctors improve their bedside manner.

Beverly is what medical schools call a standardized patient. Afterward, she critiques the future doctor's performance.

"He did the only kind of touch that was really important, and that was just a hand on top of mine and just letting me know they're going to be here for me," she told Pogue.

Is there any longer any suspicion among incoming doctors about the importance of bedside manner?

"It's more than just the drugs or the treatment," said Lynch. "It's the relationship that you're building with your patients."

Every med school hires standardized patients. But these days, simulated patients have gone high tech -- with mannequins that can simulate heart attacks, make urine, breathe, blink their eyes, even go into coma.

Are they robots? "Well, you could call them robots," said Andrews. "They're digitally-controlled mannequins that have all sorts of moving parts in them that simulate what humans do in a variety of medical conditions."

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