



August 26, 2009

Med school actors get 'sick' on the spot

By Ron Hartung

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Shoes that don't match, buttons in the wrong holes, toothpaste on her blouse, one earring missing, bad case of bedhead. Sometimes that's how **Pat Propst** shows up at the College of Medicine's Clinical Learning Center.

The next time she arrives, she might be hearing voices. Or slumped in a chair, so listless you get weary just watching her.

Propst, one of the Meryl Streeps of the med school, is part of the Standardized Patient Program. These patients give Florida State University medical students exactly what they need: an opportunity to rehearse their newfound skills with people just pretending to be ill, so they'll be prepared for those who really are.

Roughly 200 standardized patients participate – amid laughter, occasional tears and great feelings of satisfaction. Sure, the world is filled with ill people, but how many can guarantee they'll be sick next Tuesday from 1:30 to 3:30 p.m. with exactly the symptoms these students need to evaluate?

No offense to the inanimate simulators that are also key players at the College of Medicine, but sometimes educators need a real live human being.

So Dianne Walker, Dorothy Killoran and other staff members spend hours prepping these patients. There are scripts to study, rehearsals to attend. And Propst has been part of it right from the start.

"Pat is always well prepared to portray her role," said Walker, coordinator of standardized patients since 2006. "Pat 'becomes' that patient."

One day early this year, her role was to portray a patient we'll call Jane Doe. The students assigned to that day's encounters received scant information beforehand. Something like: "Jane Doe is a 65-year-old woman brought in for a routine appointment. The patient presents with a chief concern." The standardized patients, though, knew much more. They were supposed to be portraying an actual person, with a history the students would try to elicit through questioning. So the patients had a 12-page script that ... wait, we can't talk about that, or about the details of Propst's performance. It's all confidential.

But we can peek backstage.

Faculty members develop the cases and send them to Walker, who formats them in preparation for standardized patients' training. Killoran recruits the patients based on the profile the faculty created. CLC staffers determine training dates, room assignments, student instructions and more. And in the days leading up to the encounters, they train the patients.

So on that afternoon when Propst waited in Examining Room 5 for the first of her two 15-minute encounters, six other patients awaited similar assignments. Roughly half were portraying Jane Doe; the rest were portraying another patient. Faculty members were seated at computer consoles, ready

to evaluate the students via cameras and microphones in the 12 examining rooms.

When that 2 p.m. encounter was finished, a voice over the intercom signaled students to move to their next one. And so it continued until 3:27. At that point, the students provided a written or oral report of their encounters. Then came feedback from a faculty member.

Not all medical schools have standardized patients. Debra Danforth, director of the simulation center and CLC, has made presentations at other schools about FSU's program.

One huge benefit, she said, is that it lets you give every student an encounter with the same patient – because multiple people portray that patient. These days, when patients check out of hospitals so fast, that sort of common experience is rare.

Danforth said the school's high-tech simulators can demonstrate physical symptoms, such as a collapsed lung, but the patients provide the human touch during interviews. She predicts the use of standardized patients will expand, perhaps into nursing and pharmacy programs.

"It is a wonderful experience for our young students," Walker said.

And for the patients.

Propst, who's 68, retired in 2000 when she was assistant secretary of the state Department of Labor. She lives in northeast Tallahassee, where she's a gardener and "omnivorous reader." She and a friend take a trip or two a year. This May they went to Spain, Portugal, Gibraltar and Morocco.

She was involved in acting in high school and college and has always loved theater. So when she read a 2001 newspaper ad from the med school, she and a friend from water aerobics dived right in.

Back then, the scripts hadn't been fully developed yet, so Propst got to do a bit of improvising. One time, posing as a patient who heard voices in her head, she got up from her chair in the windowless exam room and, as if obeying a mischievous voice, shut off the lights. When she turned them on again, that poor student looked totally unnerved.

Every once in a while, she said, she encounters a student who already "has it all": confident, empathetic, organized, good at listening. "That's always a joy," she said. "Ninety-nine-point-nine percent of us feel we're contributing to the next generation of doctors being trained."

The encounters reflect faculty interests. When she arrives with her clothing all askew, for example, part of the idea is to teach students to be more observant.

"There's a natural tendency of the young to not really notice the old," she said. "So we're teaching them to look at us."

One of Propst's first encounters continued for four sessions spread over four weeks. In the first, the student had to tell her she'd been diagnosed with cancer. It was a test to see how the student would handle the patient's tears, anger or other reaction. In the second and third sessions, the news grew progressively worse. By the fourth, the student had to tell the family the patient had died. It was a tough assignment for all involved.

"As SPs, we were wrung out by it," she said.

The staff keeps a close eye on these participants.

"The well-being of our standardized patients is paramount," Walker said. "If an SP is asked to work on an emotionally challenging case, we take time to talk to the patient to assess their ability to handle

any stress or anxiety. Throughout the session, we maintain close attention to each portrayal, and at the conclusion of the session we have a debriefing time with the SPs, to make sure that they are good to go." Sometimes the coordinators even pass out chocolates.

The staff estimates Propst has worked in at least 40 cases (some multiple times) since 2001. Generally speaking, participants earn \$15 an hour.

Should you try it?

"I would recommend this to anyone," Propst said. "It's enjoyable and rewarding – and, dare I say it, entertaining."

Additional Facts

TO FIND OUT MORE

Visit med.fsu.edu and search for "standardized patients."
