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Can We Walk in Our Patients' Shoes? Immersive Virtual Reality as an Empathy Training Tool for Medical Students

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Empathy is arguably the “backbone” of the patient-physician relationship. It has been shown to have numerous positive clinical outcomes especially in a patient-centered careservice. Nevertheless, studies have shown a disintegration of empathy and compassion in physicians during medical school and residency training due to the lack of standardization of empathy training in medical education.

The ability of immersive virtual reality (IVR) to allow individuals to viscerally experience encounters from another person’s perspective makes it a potential effective technology to reverse the erosion of empathy in medicine and improve clinical practices. In this research project, IVR as an

innovative teaching platform for enhancing and sustaining empathy in medical students is examined.

BACKGROUND

Why IVR in medical education?

Owing to its ability to immerse its user in a sensory real-life experience, IVR has been proposed in literature as a promising technology for medical empathy training by allowing its users to virtually “step into the patients’ shoes”. Given that perspective-taking is a core component of empathy, it is not surprising that VR experiences have been shown to enhance empathy in its users by enabling them to embody another person in

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Figure 1. Medical Students using Embodied Labs

a virtual realistic environment. Studies have shown that this embodiment can have the capacity to modulate empathic responses and behaviors, bridge connections and empower people to understand others. Moreover, empirical research that explored the role of IVR in teaching empathy to health professionals have shown that participants had mostly positive learning experiences, demonstrated enhanced empathy levels and recommended its integration into their curricula.

The IVR Empathy Training Educational Intervention

In this research project, first-year medical students experience a user-focused VR scenario using the Embodied labs platform (see figure 1) from a first-person perspective.

A scenario that focuses on loneliness and social isolation in elderly patients and their effect on their health outcomes is used for this project. The IVR training focuses on key strategies of empathy and empathic communication that involve recognizing patients' emotions, the importance of eliciting a shared understanding of the patient's experiences and responding

empathically to patients. Data is collected using pre-training and post-training surveys as well as interviews.

CONCLUSION

This talk will provide an overview of this research project, the VR software that was used and will share some of the students' feedback on the training. The importance of empathy in patient care and the value of IVR as a tool for clinical empathy training will be discussed through empirical literature. The talk will conclude with a glimpse into the limitless possibilities afforded by XR/VR technologies in medical education and patient care.

Keywords— *Empathy, Virtual Reality, Medical Education*

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