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Title
Learning to Pause and Reflect: Contributions of Artificial Intelligence and Standardized Patients in Reflective Dialogue Practice in Primary Care

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QI Topic

Recognizing that primary care clinicians are often the first point of contact for mental health concerns and given the established link between mental and physical health, effective interventions are crucial. Reflective dialogue, a practice involving deliberate pauses for reflection during clinical encounters, holds promise for enhancing care. However, its widespread adoption is limited by a scarcity of expert trainers and variations in clinical communication styles. To address these barriers, we investigated the potential of artificial intelligence (AI) to emulate the expertise of experienced reflective dialogue practitioners, utilizing large language models (LLMs) to generate realistic case vignettes and communication guidance for attendings, residents, and medical students.

Data and Method

To facilitate practical training, we partnered with international leaders in reflective dialogue through intensive workshops in 2024 and 2025. Addressing privacy concerns associated with real patient interactions, we engaged two standardized patients (SPs) to enact case vignettes (written with assistance from LLMs) within a psychologically safe learning environment at the UC San Diego School of Medicine's Immersive Learning Center. Under the guidance of expert reflective dialogue trainers, residents interviewed SPs portraying a young adult with first-onset psychosis and a parent seeking primary care, with attending physicians present to promote transparency and to model reflective dialogue. All sessions were video recorded to enable reflection through stimulated recall.

Results

Our results underscore the significant role of reflective dialogue in primary care practice and medical education. We found that AI can effectively generate realistic clinical encounter content and processes. Furthermore, the use of SPs allowed trainees to concentrate on learning rather than performance, and SP feedback on the effectiveness of reflective dialogue approaches supported iterative learning. While a core feature of reflective dialogue is pausing for reflection during the encounter—a practice uncommon in busy ambulatory settings—trainees initially struggled with its introduction. Practicing with SPs enabled them to organically integrate reflective moments, allowing for shared reflection among the attending and resident. Positive SP feedback, such as, "It was just a genuine time to reflect, … it definitely helped diffuse the heat between the two of us," highlighted its utility. Workshop participants reported improved relationships with patients, families, and colleagues through reflective dialogue practice.

Significance

Pioneering a novel approach, this initiative represents the inaugural global effort to synergistically harness the power of AI and Standardized Patients (SPs) for training healthcare professionals in the critical skill of reflective dialogue. The wealth of readily available online text and video resources encompassing reflective dialogue, mental

health, and evidence-based patient-centered care forms a robust foundation for our AI-assisted training modules. By effectively integrating AI and SP methodologies, we aim to empower both learners and faculty to confidently implement dialogical practices, ultimately fostering enhanced care and greater autonomy for individuals navigating mental and physical health challenges. Recognizing that real-world patient interaction remains paramount, our AI-facilitated vignettes and SP encounters offer a cost-effective augmentation to traditional medical education. Furthermore, this framework provides a unique research platform for developing innovative strategies to cultivate compassionate, patient-centered care in future clinicians.