

SimuCase avatars advance speech-language pathology training

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A new commercial venture, using technology developed at Case Western Reserve University's College of Arts and Sciences and Case School of Engineering, has made available avatars—virtual patients—to train speech-language pathologists.

SimuCase allows graduate students and others training to evaluate speech-language disorders to practice using an interactive, Web-based program, reducing stress on the trainee, because a diagnosis doesn't have to be made on a real person.

Graduate students studying to become speech-language pathologists have previously relied on classroom instruction, paper-based case studies and working with experienced therapists to gain experience needed for recommending interventions.

SimuCase avatars may present such challenges as a head injury, autism, difficulty hearing, or more than one language spoken at home and school.

SimuCase scenarios are based on information from actual speech-language pathology cases. One, for example, involves avatar Kara Lynn, a 3 ½-year-old referred for assessment by her preschool teacher because of unintelligible speech.

The first 10 SimuCase avatars are children, ranging from preschoolers to teenagers. Typically, the person or group in training would check a case

history and then interact with the avatar by selecting or typing questions.

SimuCase users can discover through practice the best ways to interact with patients and others, such as a child's teacher or caregiver. There are also professional colleagues to consult. This training can occur anywhere, whenever the lesson is best for the therapist in training.

By asking the right questions, collaborating appropriately and using proper assessment data, the SimuCase user can more easily learn to make a [correct diagnosis](#), according to Stacy L. Williams, PhD, adjunct assistant professor at Case Western Reserve's Department of [Psychological Sciences](#) Program in Communication Sciences.

"Virtual simulations are intended to build knowledge, skill and professional judgment. These are qualities that contribute to successful, competent clinicians," said Williams, president of SpeechPathology.com, the online home of SimuCase.

Case Western Reserve's Technology Transfer Office licensed the virtual simulation technology that SpeechPathology.com developed in partnership with the Ohio Department of Education. The state agency's Ohio Master's Network Initiatives in Education-Speech Language Pathology (OMNIE Project) identifies issues necessary to ensure the education, recruitment and retention of qualified speech-language pathologists in Ohio schools.

The U.S. Labor Department estimates that demand for speech-language pathologists is expected to grow by 23 percent from 2010 to 2020. As the population grows older, there will be more instances of health conditions that cause impairments.

SpeechPathology.com is now working on adding adult avatars to simulate patients with these conditions.

"That would make SimuCase even more valuable. It is difficult otherwise to give students experience in all these types of scenarios," said Williams, who also is chief operations officer of Allied Health Media LLC, an online provider for continuing education and career opportunities for professionals in audiology, [speech-language pathology](#), occupational therapy and physical therapy.

Provided by Case Western Reserve University

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