

Virtual Patients: A new generation in Problem-Based Learning?

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Virtual patients are interactive computer simulations of real life clinical scenarios for the purpose of medical training education and assessment. They are ideal tools for teaching clinical decision-making.

Problem-based Learning (PBL) is a well-established process in undergraduate medicine, in which students in groups work through a patient scenario, defining the knowledge they require to understand the scenario, exploring diagnoses and subsequent management, and generating learning objectives as they progress. However, as the case unfolds, no matter what the students may reason, or management strategies they select, the case is paper-based, can only unfold in one direction, and is inflexible.

To create a more interactive, decision-making model of our PBL course delivery the eLearning Unit, at St George's replaced the paper-based with interactive online VPs. As these cases develop, at key points in the case students are presented with options, take decisions, and then explore the consequences of their actions. This process was very successful, and virtual patients have now replaced paper cases at the core of our medical curriculum. In addition, formative assessment VPs were created to provide additional self-directed learning opportunities as companions each week to the relevant PBL cases. eLU also trialled the use of VPs in Virtual Worlds.

This presentation will consider the impact on students and tutors of VPs and associated innovations.