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Twelve tips for efficient procedural simulation

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ABSTRACT
Procedural simulation (PS) is increasingly being used worldwide in healthcare for training caregivers in psychomotor competencies. It has been demonstrated to improve learners' confidence and competence in technical procedures, with consequent positive impacts on patient outcomes and safety. Several frameworks can guide healthcare educators in using PS as an educational tool. However, no theory-informed practical framework exists to guide them in including PS in their training programs. We present 12 practical tips for efficient PS training that translates educational concepts from theory to practice, based on the existing literature. In doing this, we aim to help healthcare educators to adequately incorporate and use PS both for optimal learning and for transfer into professional practice.

Introduction

Simulation is increasingly used worldwide as an educational tool in healthcare training programs. It has been proven effective in initial and continuing medical education (Cook et al. 2011) for both teaching and training (Nestel et al. 2011). It has also been demonstrated to improve patient care processes and outcomes, particularly patient safety (Brydges, Hatala, et al. 2015; Griswold-Theodorson et al. 2015).

Procedural simulation (PS) is one of the many forms of simulation, which also includes immersive simulation (IS), virtual simulation and simulated patients. It can be defined as any simulation activity that uses various teaching tools aimed at the acquisition of competencies required for a particular technique or procedure (Chiniara et al. 2013). Competency for a given procedure represents the ability to decide upon a course of action and adequately accomplish a somewhat complex procedure, in a variety of situations or cases. It therefore requires for its accomplishment not only the psychomotor skills, but also cognitive skills (heuristics, etc.) and communication skills (such as interactions with patients and other staff), and a sound knowledge base related to the procedure at hand. Airway management and neuraxial block are examples of techniques well suited to PS training.

Interest in this type of simulation has been rekindled by the recent concerns over patient safety (Ziv et al. 2003). Indeed, the modern evolution of medical clinical practice, with patient safety concerns, mandated reduced work hours, and shorter hospital stays, among other factors, has modified the training landscape for the acquisition of psychomotor competencies (Pugh et al. 2015). More and more institutions across the world are developing simulation centers, and PS is being increasingly used in healthcare teaching programs. Simulation has many benefits, among which the provision of a safe environment for learners, who are offered feedback and allowed to make mistakes without adverse effects on a patient, and without interfering with clinical practice.

However, integrating PS into healthcare curricula is not necessarily a simple process. It should be evidence-based, and grounded in learning theories. The many learning theories that underlie PS stem from different domains. To our knowledge, only few articles, if any, provide a synthesis that is helpful to clinical educators wishing to include PS into their curricula. Table 1 describes four frameworks that could be potentially useful for educators planning to include PS in their programs, and summarizes their pros and cons in terms of usefulness. However, none is fully adapted to educators in search of a practical but theory-informed framework, neither do they focus specifically on PS. In the present paper, we aim to provide 12 theory-informed practical tips for healthcare educators planning to include PS training sessions in their program. Our tips are based on the educational principles or theories listed below, as sound guiding principles for the use of PS in healthcare. Based on the literature review and our own experience with PS, we describe 12 practical tips that follow a "Design, Apply, Evaluate and Follow up" sequence summarized in Figure 1.

Tip 1

Simulation is but one tool: Choose it wisely!

Simulation is not an end in itself and must complement other activities. In fact, simulation might not always be the best instructional method (Ilgen et al. 2013), nor is it often the most cost-effective given the resources it requires.

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Table 1. A comparative summary of existing frameworks potentially useful for educators planning to include procedural simulation (PS) in their programs.

Framework Citation	Conceptual framework Kneebone (2005)	CNSH instructional design framework Chiniara et al. (2013)	BEME guide Motola et al. (2013)	Learn, See, Practice, Prove, Do, Maintain Sawyer et al. (2015)
Description	A conceptual framework for judging the usefulness of a given PS by selecting four key areas: - gaining and retaining technical proficiency, - the place of expert assistance in task-based learning, - learning within a professional context, - the affective component of learning	Dedicated framework and supporting taxonomy for instructional design (ID) to assist educators in creating appropriate simulation learning experiences. It presents four progressive levels describing the educational intervention: - medium of delivery of instruction - simulation modality selection - instructional method selection - presentation of the detailed characteristics of the intervention	BEME guide that provides practical guidance to aid educators in effectively using simulation for training, with best practices and illustrative case studies. Eight concepts are explained and detailed, applying to simulation in general: - curriculum integration - feedback - deliberate practice - mastery learning - range of difficulty - capturing clinical variation - individualized learning and approach to team training	A six-step pedagogical framework for procedural skill training: - Learn: requisite cognitive knowledge - See: observation of the procedure - Practice: deliberate practice on a simulator - Prove: mastery achievement required before … - Do: … performing procedure on patient independently - and Maintain: sustain clinical and simulated practice
Pros	- Good introductory article on conceptual frameworks for learning through PS - Explains landmarks for adequate PS: competency decay prevention, expert feedback, authenticity, and affective component of learning	- Structured and practical framework providing efficient tools to guide educators in selecting appropriate simulation media (zone of simulation matrix, media and simulation modality selection chart based on learning outcomes) - Framework evidence-based as much as possible	- Evidence-based as much as possible - Detailed guide with a lot of concrete examples - Highlighted practice points - Include a curriculum integration framework with concrete examples	- Structured framework that is grounded on a review of the literature using a critical synthesis approach - Evaluation of mastery based on mastery learning - Adopts a process-based approach to PS rather than an outcome-based approach (*see tip 8*) - Describes a checklist/global hybrid assessment tool
Cons	- One expert opinion - The theoretical concepts underlying PS sessions are introduced with no concrete tools to build a PS session	- Tackles simulation in general rather than PS itself - Terminology is somewhat idiosyncratic for non-experts in the field - Media selection chart is not updated	- Not a framework in itself, rather a guide introducing and detailing numerous concepts underlying simulation use - Tackles simulation in general rather than PS itself	- Focuses mainly on how learner should acquire procedural competencies, not on how educators should plan their PS sessions

BEME: Best Evidence Medical Education; CNSH: Canadian Network of Simulation in Healthcare.

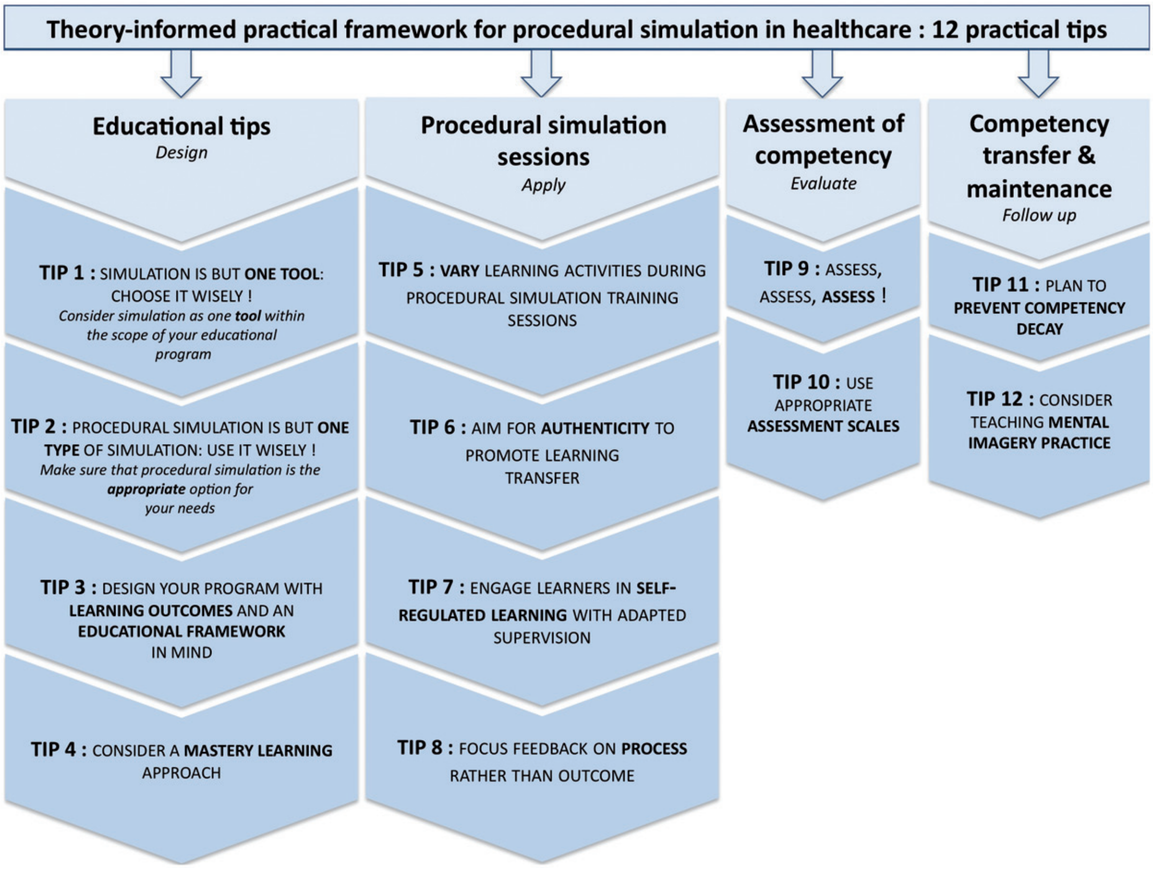

Figure 1. Twelve theory-informed practical tips introduced for educators planning to include procedural simulation in their healthcare programs.

The selection of simulation can be based on the acuity (severity of the potential consequences of the event) and opportunity (frequency) of the target event, as described in the zone of simulation matrix model (Chiniara et al. 2013). According to this model (Figure 2), events that lend themselves most to simulation in a given population of learners are those whose consequences can be dire on the patient (high acuity/low opportunity, i.e. drug-induced anaphylactic shock); or high acuity/high opportunity, i.e. trauma management in the emergency department), and those that occur less frequently (low acuity/low opportunity, i.e. ultrasound-guided peripheral catheter insertion) (Chiniara et al. 2013). Invasive technical procedures in humans can be mostly considered of high acuity (risk of iatrogenic complications), although this will vary depending on the clinical and training context.

Figure 2. The zone of simulation matrix, reproduced with permission (Chiniara et al. 2013). *Acuity* is defined as the potential severity of an event or a series of events and their subsequent impact on the patient. *Opportunity* is defined as the frequency in which a particular department or individual is actively involved in the management of the event. The "zone of simulation" is that area in which simulation may be advantageous over other instructional media. Within this zone, simulation can serve as an acceptable substitute or complement to other, less expensive, media and methods. This matrix is a useful tool to educators for determining whether PS could be a suitable instructional method.

Tip 2

Procedural simulation is but one type of simulation: Use it wisely!

Simulation includes a wide range of educational experiences. It is thus important to select the right simulation option for the targeted competency domains or learning outcomes (Harden 2007). One conceptual framework, developed by the Canadian Network for Simulation in Healthcare, provides tables for the selection of media and simulation modalities (Chiniara et al. 2013). According to this framework, PS is best suited for training in techniques and procedures, along with their associated beliefs and attitudes, either through self-learning with motor practice, or through directed learning.

PS must complement other instructional methods to enhance the efficiency of an educational program. Knowledge of a procedure itself and its place in patient management should ideally be learnt by students through other means, such as reading material and/or video demonstration, prior to simulation (Seropian 2003). In addition, other simulation modalities, such as IS, which reproduces real-life situations in authentic workplace environment, might complement PS to contextualize the knowledge required for learning.

Care should be taken when using PS within the scope of a wider, "hybrid" simulation. Hybrid simulation activities, combining PS with either IS or simulated patients, are helpful to develop attitudes, beliefs or clinical ethics related to a technical procedure (Edinger et al. 1999). Hybrid simulations must be designed appropriately by allotting specific time for technical skills training, as well as communication with the patient or team (Kneebone et al. 2002). As for IS, it is mainly used for the practice of team training and crisis resource management (Rosen et al. 2008; Jaffrelot et al. 2013; Boet et al. 2014) and is not the most appropriate method for teaching procedures, except for some life-threatening bedside procedures like difficult airway intubation (Sudikoff et al. 2009; Nishisaki et al. 2011).

Tip 3

Design your program with learning outcomes and an instructional framework in mind

Any sound learning program should be designed with a solid instructional framework. Several such frameworks have been suggested and adapted to simulation (Kneebone 2005; Chiniara et al. 2013; Motola et al. 2013; Sawyer et al. 2015). A brief summary of those frameworks is provided in Table 1, and interested readers are referred to the articles cited for further details. Cognitive load theory (Fraser et al. 2015; Naismith et al. 2015) provides an additional framework for designing simulations that optimize learning by minimizing extraneous load (related to the instructional method) and managing intrinsic load (related to the task and learner's current level of expertise). In other words, PS activities should be designed in order to maximize the learner's cognitive resources that are dedicated to the task (Leppink and Duvivier 2016).

Since it is tempting to unduly increase the number of PS tasks or activities, learning outcomes must be clearly defined during the instructional design process, both for the training session and for the individual simulation tasks. These outcomes usually are knowledge and skills related to task planning and performance, as well as underlying beliefs and attitudes. They can be based on existing competency frameworks or generated through task analysis of the relevant domain (Weinger et al. 1994).

Tip 4

Consider a mastery learning approach

Mastery learning is a solid basis for effective simulation (Cook et al. 2013; Eppich et al. 2015), including PS (Barsuk et al. 2009, 2012, 2015, 2016). It is recognized as a necessary component of competency-based education (McGaghie 2015). Mastery learning (Kulik et al. 1990) is a systematic approach in which learners proceed to a new, more complex learning outcome only after having achieved significant mastery in the prior outcome. Task difficulty and complexity is hence progressively increased each time mastery in an underlying task is achieved. To that end, learners' knowledge, skills and attitudes are rigorously assessed after each task or learning outcome. They are improved by

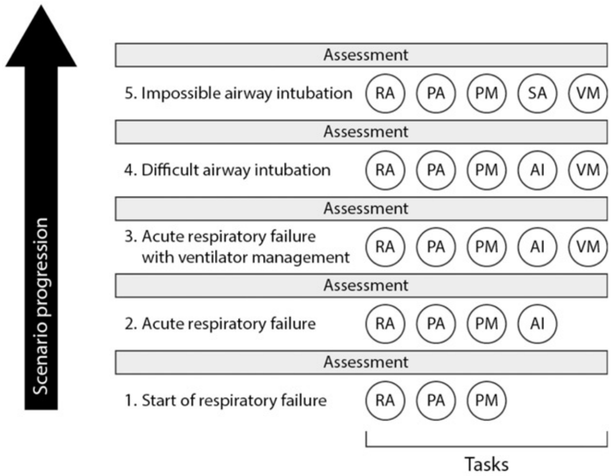

Figure 3. Example of a complete procedural simulation program for airway management based on a mastery learning approach. Nested tasks: RA: resources assessment; PA: patient assessment; PM: pre-medication; AI: airway intubation; SA: surgical airway; VM: ventilator management. Based on Eppich et al. (2015).

repetitive deliberate practice, guided by iterative and robust feedback, without any time limitation for achieving competency. Indeed, mastery learning's main limitation is the variable time needed for each learner to achieve a given learning outcome.

Figure 3 exemplifies a mastery learning approach used in a program for anesthesiology residents aimed at acquiring competency in airway management. In the first learning task or scenario, the learner starts by assessing available resources (team, material) and patient information (records, examination), and learning medication used for airway management. In scenario 2, the learner proceeds to normal (easy) airway intubation, with assistance. In scenario 3, the learner performs intubation without assistance, checks for complications and manages the ventilator. In scenario 4, the learner proceeds to a difficult airway intubation. Finally, in the last scenario, the learner manages a "cannot intubate" situation and must perform a surgical airway. Moving on to each step is preceded by a rigorous assessment that demonstrates proficiency in the previous scenario.

Tip 5

Vary learning activities during procedural simulation sessions

According to the schema theory of motor skill learning (Schmidt 1975), learning activities should vary during PS sessions. This theory suggests that an abstract cognitive structure, called a general motor scheme, directs the execution of a family of movements and actions. A progressive variation of the training task parameters and a tight control of four sources of information (or learning variables) allow for the creation of the general motor scheme. These sources are: the initial conditions of the environment and training task; the variables of each parameter of the task; the sensory feedback; and the task's objective results (Taktek 2009). To be effective, training on a given task should be done with progressive variations in each of the four sources. For example, better task achievement will be reached if learners perform bronchoscopy on a model with different anatomical variations. Specific surgical training tasks, called OSATS (Objective Structured Assessment of Technical Skills), have been developed in conformity with this theory. They are also used to standardize skills assessment (Martin et al. 1997; Reznick and MacRae 2006).

Tip 6

Aim for authenticity to promote transfer

The ultimate goal of PS is transfer of competency to real life. However, competencies cannot be separated from the context in which they have been acquired: learning is contextualized or "situated" (Brown et al. 1989). Authenticity of the learning context is thus the cornerstone of transfer. A learning activity is authentic inasmuch as it involves the same cognitive or physical processes as the target task, irrespective of simulation "fidelity" or realism. In fact, low physical fidelity has yielded comparable learning outcomes as higher-fidelity simulation in teaching endo-urological skills (Matsumoto et al. 2002).

Indeed, task realism (or fidelity) is not the only prerequisite for effective transfer. Other important factors are: the learner's intrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan 1985; Fox and Miner 1999); adapting the learning task to a novice's mastered skills in order to avoid negative transfer (Hatala et al. 1999); and the context of learning (situated cognition, see Brown et al. 1989). It should be noted that the concept of fidelity is often used inappropriately; for example, PS is often defined as "low-fidelity", because it does not reproduce the environment, even though it reproduces the task authentically.

Therefore, focusing mainly on functional task alignment or authenticity, i.e. matching simulation characteristics to task requisites, rather than physical resemblance, is recommended (Hamstra et al. 2014). For example, an airway intubation simulator that does not look fully human but provides adequate tissue elasticity and airway anatomy to allow for a correct task reproduction is preferable to a realistic-looking full-body human simulator with a stiff airway.

Tip 7

Engage learners in self-regulated learning (SRL) with adapted supervision

Ensuring that students "learn how to learn" is paramount nowadays, as new medical knowledge and techniques constantly emerge. SRL is important in acquiring psychomotor competencies and ensuring proficiency at a high level of expertise. Bridges et al. demonstrated that SRL prevented competency decay at three months, compared to instructor-regulated learning, in the context of lumbar puncture simulation training (Brydges et al. 2012).

The social-cognitive model of SRL suggests four steps in the learning process during PS: the learner watches, then imitates the instructor (or instructional media) during the *observational* and *emulative* stages, he self-selects sources of learning in the *self-control* stage, and finally he successfully and spontaneously adapts to new situations in the *adaptive* stage (Schunk and Zimmerman 1997; Schunk 1999). In order to engage learners in SRL, they should control the affective, cognitive and behavioral processes during learning (Sitzmann and Ely 2011). This control occurs not only during the emulative and observational stages of the four-step model, but also by involving the learners in defining the learning outcomes and choosing the learning strategies.

Supervision is a cornerstone of PS training sessions, as immediate rectification, based on objective criteria, is of major importance for future SRL (Brydges, Manzone, et al. 2015). It sustains learner's intrinsic motivation, which is crucial for learning (Deci and Ryan 1985; Fox and Miner 1999; Kaufman 2003). It also fosters positive emotions in learners to anchor new learning (Ferro 1993; Cassar 2004; Kneebone 2005). It enhances transfer by alternating between contextualization (i.e. discussing knowledge and competencies as applied in the learning context), de-contextualization (i.e. abstracting overarching principles), and re-contextualization (i.e. applying acquired knowledge in new contexts) during feedback (Frenay and Bédard 2004; Kriz 2010). Moreover, better outcomes are achieved with adequate supervision that shares responsibility in achieving goals between learner and supervisor (Brydges, Manzone, et al. 2015).

Learners should be encouraged to create communities of practice and learning, as achieving mastery resides not in the educators' efforts, but in the organization of communities of practice of which educators are but one part (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 2008). Interactions between learners themselves (peer-to-peer feedback) and/or with instructor(s) in a constructivist framework are important, and promote ongoing SRL (Montgomery et al. 2012; Murdoch et al. 2013; Pucher et al. 2013).

Tip 8

Focus feedback on process rather than outcome

Feedback is key in simulation (Decker et al. 2013). It can be defined as "specific information about the comparison between a trainee's observed performance and a standard, given with the intent to improve trainee's performance" (van de Ridder et al. 2008).

It is usually tempting to assess learner's competency based on his outcome in the task rather than on the processes that led to the specific outcome. In fact, most procedural simulators do provide immediate outcome feedback through the success or failure of the task (natural feedback). However, it has been shown that students who focus on outcomes and not on procedures tend to fail significantly more in performing venipuncture in a clinical context (Cleary and Sandars 2011). Hence, *process-based* feedback should be a priority in PS and is essential for deliberate practice (Ericsson 2004). Emphasis on the quality of task performance (process or descriptive feedback) fosters learning, especially for complex tasks (Johnson et al. 1993). While process feedback is usually provided by an expert supervisor, some simulators can enhance feedback through computer-generated information (augmented feedback) (Botden et al. 2008; Alaraj et al. 2013).

Tip 9

Assess, assess, assess!

Assessment is key to learning. It is essential in SRL (Cleary and Sandars 2011; Brydges and Butler 2012) (see tip # 7) and is the cornerstone of mastery learning and deliberate practice (see tip # 4). How summative assessment should be done in PS, however, is still a matter of debate (Bould et al. 2009), as few if any technical skill assessment measures have demonstrated sufficient validity. Yet, assessment drives learning (Swanson et al. 1995; Lafleur and Côté 2016). What's more, summative assessment is mandatory in mastery learning as it provides feedback to students and determines whether they can proceed or not to the next step in learning.

As for formative assessment, it is beneficial to students since it actively involves them in the learning process, thus yielding improved knowledge retention (Rolfe and McPherson 1995; Parry et al. 2013; Evans et al. 2014; Cook et al. 2015; Mitra and Barua 2015). As discussed in the previous tip, feedback is an integral part of formative assessment for PS and should be provided frequently and abundantly.

Tip 10

Use appropriate assessment scales

Choosing an appropriate instrument for assessment of competency is an important issue when integrating simulation in learning programs. Recent studies suggest that checklists have shortcomings when assessing technical skills as they can omit essential competencies (McKinley, Strand, Ward, et al. 2008) and may lack specificity: high checklist scores do not always rule out incompetence (Ma et al. 2012; Walzak et al. 2015). As such, global rating scales (GRS) are preferred for competency assessment. As an example of an appropriate assessment tool, a team recently introduced a GRS to assess technical competency in simulated bedside procedures (Walzak et al. 2015). They used a scale ranging from "not competent to perform independently" to "above average competence to perform independently", applied to items such as "appropriate preparation of instrument pre-procedure", "appropriate analgesia", "specific components of technical ability", "aseptic technique" and "seeks help where appropriate". Such scales with more generic criteria assess not only technical competency, but also competency in the overall procedure, and are particularly well adapted to PS (McKinley, Strand, Gray, et al. 2008).

Other indicators can also be used for assessment in PS, such as the numerous objective metrics provided by computerized simulators (so-called virtual-reality simulators), e.g. time required and number of movements for specific surgical interventions (Aggarwal et al. 2009; Van Bruwaene et al. 2014). Such assessment tools can be useful to compare novice and expert performance and to engage in deliberate practice. However, rather than trusting predetermined goals set by simulator manufacturers, the metrics that correspond to local performance standards of expertise should be measured in any given institution or based on established guidelines.

Tip 11

Plan to prevent competency decay

Once achieved, competency will decay over time without regular practice, a phenomenon called "deskilling" (Arthur et al. 1998; Sawyer et al. 2015). Time before deskilling of simulation-acquired competency is variable and depends mainly on learners' experience. It will happen quicker in novice learners compared to experienced caregivers (Arthur et al. 1998; Howells et al. 2009). Other factors that affect time before deskilling include nature of the task (cognitive vs physical, with cognitive skills decaying first), similarity of context between retrieval and retention (Arthur et al. 1998), length of time before using the skills, degree of overlearning (Perez et al. 2013), and learning methods (with interactive activities such as simulation being superior to observation or didactic methods) (Waters et al. 2014). In one study, deskilling in hemodialysis catheter insertion occurred within 6 months to one year in nephrology fellows and thus required "booster training" at 6 months (Ahya et al. 2012).

Simulation holds a place of choice for "re-skilling" or "skill maintenance" (Kneebone et al. 2004; Ahya et al. 2012; Sawyer et al. 2015). To that end, several methods to provide simulation-based maintenance of competency can be used: "dressed rehearsals", "rolling refreshers," "just-in-time training", and "booster training" (Kovacs et al. 2000; Niles et al. 2009; Scholtz et al. 2013; Bender et al. 2014; Sawyer et al. 2015). However, there is still a paucity of research on "deskilling" time, as well as optimal timing of "re-skilling" sessions.

Tip 12

Consider teaching mental imagery practice

Mental imagery practice could be a useful tool to prevent competency decay (Cocks et al. 2014; Rao et al. 2015). Procedural memory is a form of long-term memory in which information is learnt by two means: self-repetition maintenance (information is mentally repeated) and self-repetition integration (information is semantically associated with what is already known) (Gupta and Cohen 2002). Experience is essential in creating this memory, as is repetition. Mental imagery practice, the process of mentally rehearsing a technique before executing it, can be useful to facilitate technical competency acquisition and maintenance, as it has been shown in elite sport athletes for a long time (Woolfolk et al. 1985), and more recently suggested for surgeons (Cocks et al. 2014; Rao et al. 2015). A cyclical six-stages technique for imagery practice has been described in surgery, but is applicable to other domains: task definition, prior learning, mental rehearsal, reflection, problem solving and reality check (Hall 2002). Learners should be taught how to apply this six-steps sequence prior or concomitantly to simulation sessions and task execution, as an effective SRL strategy, in order to enhance training and psychomotor competency acquisition.

Conclusions

As summarized in Figure 1, in order for PS to be effective, it must be included in an educational program (tip #1), created through a rigorous instructional design process (tip #2) with clearly identified learning outcomes (tip #3) upon which simulation training and assessment (tips #9 and 10) are based. Planning for task variation (tip #5) and adequate authenticity to promote transfer (tip #6) is crucial for PS sessions. Providing adequate process-based feedback (tip #8) is the basis of learner's self-regulated progression (tip #7) to mastery. To that end, mastery learning (tip #4) and mental imagery practice (tip #10) can be useful methods. Formative and summative assessments (tips #9 and 10) must be integrated into the curriculum, as required for mastery learning. Finally, competency decay must be taken into account (tip #11), and prevented through recurrent training sessions, sustained SRL, and imagery practice (tip #12).

It is now clear that competencies acquired through PS training can be transferred to actual clinical practice (Bagai et al. 2012; Dawe et al. 2014) with a large benefit on learners' confidence and efficiency (Brydges, Hatala, et al. 2015). It is of note that factors other than the simulator itself play a positive role in competency transfer. Some have been discussed in this paper, and it is our hope that the 12 tips we introduce will allow educators to design better activities for learning through PS.

The strength of our approach is to convert theory-informed concepts about PS into practical tips for healthcare educators. These tips constitute an overall conceptual framework as well as specific practical steps for instructional design of PS training activities.

Beyond the emphasis on the 12 tips, it is important to note that the role of healthcare educators is paramount in simulation-based activities such as PS. Indeed, a major issue in managing a simulation center is to retain competent instructors as long as possible (Kim et al. 2011). This issue should be given specific attention in order for any simulation program to remain active, attractive, and provide a high quality learning experience.

Finally, more research should be conducted on preventing deskilling in trainees, and, more widely, in professional caregivers. As with learning a new language, maintaining newly acquired procedural competencies seem to rest on repeated deliberate practice through simulation, using imagery practice, and, ultimately, applying the newly developed skills on patients. However, new strategies to fight against competency decay should be of particular interest for researchers in the field of simulation, as shown, for example, with hybrid immersive/PS (Boet et al. 2011).

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