

Walking in their shoes: Using virtual reality to elicit empathy in healthcare providers

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Research has shown empathy gives healthcare workers the ability to provide appropriate supports and make fewer mistakes. This helps increase patient satisfaction and enhance patient outcomes, resulting in

better overall care. In an upcoming issue of the *Journal of Medical Imaging and Radiation Sciences*, multidisciplinary clinicians and researchers from Dalhousie University performed an integrative review to synthesize the findings regarding virtual reality (VR) as a pedagogical tool for eliciting empathetic behavior in medical radiation technologists (MRTs).

Informally, empathy is often described as the capacity to put oneself in the shoes of another. Empathy is essential to patient-centered care and crucial to the development of therapeutic relationships between carers ([healthcare providers](#), healthcare students, and informal caregivers such as parents, spouses, friends, family, clergy, social workers, and fellow patients) and care recipients. Currently, there is a need for the development of effective tools and approaches that are standardizable, low-risk, safe-to-fail, easily repeatable, and could assist in eliciting empathetic behavior.

This research synthesis looked at studies investigating VR experiences that ranged from a single eight-minute session to sessions lasting 20-25 minutes in duration delivered on two separate days, both in immersive VR environments where participants assumed the role of a care recipient, and non-immersive VR environments where the participants assumed the role of a care provider in a simulated care setting. The two types of studies helped researchers gain an understanding of what it is like to have a specific disease or need and to practice interacting with virtual care recipients.

"Although the studies we looked at don't definitively show VR can help sustain empathy behaviors over time, there is a lot of promise for research and future applications in this area," explained lead author Megan Brydon, MSc, BHSc, RTNM, IWK Health Centre, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

The authors conclude that VR may provide an effective and wide-ranging tool for the learning of care recipients' perspectives and that future studies should seek to determine which VR experiences are the most effective in evoking empathetic behaviors. They recommend that these studies employ high order designs that are better able to control biases.

More information: Megan Brydon et al, Virtual Reality as a Tool for Eliciting Empathetic Behaviour in Carers: An Integrative Review, *Journal of Medical Imaging and Radiation Sciences* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jmir.2021.04.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmir.2021.04.005)

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