



Alcohol Screenings and Interventions Done Better: Simulation Software Helps Health Practitioners Practice With Realistic Virtual Patients

According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), 3 in 10 U.S. adults drink at levels that put them at risk physically, mentally, and socially. Studies have shown that healthcare providers are in a prime position to give life-changing advice to patients who are at risk for alcohol abuse, but the providers are reluctant to perform alcohol assessments, interventions, and referrals. SIMmersion LLC, in association with the University of Wisconsin, is launching a conversation simulation to help practitioners and trainers practice talking to patients who drink, in accordance with NIAAA guidelines.

Columbia, MD ([PRWEB](#)) September 2, 2008 -- Alcohol abuse is one of the most serious health concerns in America; a 2004 survey conducted by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) revealed that about 3 in 10 U.S. adults drink at levels that put them at risk physically, mentally, and socially, and nearly 1 out of every 13 American adults is dependant on or abuses alcohol. Studies have shown that healthcare providers are in a prime position to give life-changing advice to patients who are at risk for alcohol abuse. But despite these compelling facts, published reports show that patients who drink heavily only receive an assessment and referral to treatment 10 percent of the time.

Healthcare providers have been reluctant to perform alcohol assessments, interventions, and referrals. Many have not practiced the skills necessary to talk about alcohol, and others are uncomfortable discussing alcohol consumption since patients may respond with reluctance and ambivalence towards changing their drinking habits. [SIMmersion LLC](#) announces the launch of a conversation simulation to help healthcare providers and those who train providers teach and reinforce skills, in accordance with the standards set by the NIAAA.

"Part of the reason I started SIMmersion was to be able to help people. This product will ultimately improve the quality of life for thousands," says Dr. Dale Olsen, Founder and CEO of SIMmersion LLC. "The simulation gives healthcare provides a chance to practice talking to people about a very sensitive subject; it will give them the skill and confidence necessary to help people struggling with alcohol abuse turn their lives around."

The simulation was funded by a Small Business Innovative Research grant and developed in partnership with the University of Wisconsin. Program users talk with simulated character Christy Johnson, whom they meet when she visits their clinic for follow-up care after a car accident. The conversation is focused on conducting an alcohol screening and brief intervention for Christy. Users can discuss a variety of topics including Christy's drinking habits, the consequences of her drinking, Christy's readiness to change, and a patient plan. They can also get to know Christy by asking appropriate personal questions.

Christy behaves and responds differently during each conversation--she may be low-risk, at-risk, or dependant on alcohol, with different motivations to drink. Christy may be more or less likely to consider changing her drinking habits, and the user's ability to employ patient-centered communication will color her opinion. This variety allows for repeated practice that can be generalized to real world conversations with all patients.

Dr. Michael Fleming, Professor of Family medicine at the University of Wisconsin has seen the difficulty for



students and professionals he has mentored to talk to their patients about alcohol: "We have a number of techniques to teach how to help patients who have alcohol or drug problems, like lectures, role plays, and demonstrations, but they are all somewhat passive and don't allow practice saying the right words to patients. SIMmersion's technology goes beyond anything we've ever been able to do before. It's much more interactive and realistic--it's much more adult learning."

"When you use the software, it becomes very real--you feel like you're talking to a live person. It's not just a standardized patient or a script. We have nothing like this in the field that I've ever seen."

In addition to practicing real conversations, users receive real-time support and feedback from an on-screen Coach and other embedded help features. Users also receive a score at the end of their conversation that grades their techniques and diagnosis. As a result of using the simulation, healthcare providers will be more comfortable discussing alcohol with real patients, and they will be better able to diagnose a patient's alcohol risk level accurately, use patient-centered communication effectively, ask appropriate NIAAA-recommended screening questions, address brief intervention topics appropriate for a patient's risk level, and determine how much time is appropriate for discussing alcohol issues.

The University of Wisconsin recently completed a study of the efficacy of the screening and brief intervention training over a period of six months. The study showed that those using SIMmersion's training simulation conducted significantly better alcohol screenings and interventions than those who did not use the simulation.

SIMmersion LLC's Alcohol Screening and Brief Intervention Simulation is currently available for purchase. For purchase information, visit [SIMmersion's product page](#) or call 443-283-2555.

SIMmersion LLC creates exceptionally realistic interactive simulations that help learners build, practice, and retain communication skills. SIMmersion simulations allow users to conduct face-to-face conversations with simulated characters. Professional actors are used to create life-like, challenging situations. Each simulated character has memory and an advanced emotional model that allows the character to respond to the user's statements as a real person would. The result is a nearly free-form conversation that is different each time the simulation is used. Users receive feedback through the non-verbal cues of an on-screen coach, quantitative scoring at the end of each interaction, and instant replay features. SIMmersion LLC is a spin-off of Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory.

For more information, go to www.SIMmersion.com].

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