

Impact of Clinical Simulation on the Comprehensive Development of Competencies in Medical Students

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Medical education seeks more than theoretical instruction; it pursues to develop practical and cognitive competencies through clinical simulation strategies, a tool that replicates complex and safe environments, fostering technical and soft skills; however, its global and Latin American adoption faces resource and training limitations.

Objective: To evaluate the relationship between the implementation of clinical simulation strategies and the development of professional competencies, based on the perception of medical students in an Ecuadorian university.

Methods: A positivist paradigm study was conducted, with a quantitative approach, non-experimental, descriptive-inferential, cross-sectional design, involving 93 eighth and ninth semester students, through the application of surveys with Likert-type scales to measure the perception of simulation (V1) and the development of competencies (V2). The data were processed in Excel and SPSS 25, using Spearman's correlation test to evaluate the relationship between the two study variables.

Results: 60% of the students considered the simulation as an effective strategy for learning; however, 34% showed average evaluations. Debriefing was positively evaluated by 66% of the participants, highlighting its relevance in the consolidation of learning. Spearman's correlation showed a moderate-high positive relationship ($Rho=0.641$, $p<0.01$) between simulation and competency development, suggesting that its improvement impacts favorably on student skills.

Conclusions: The findings confirm the effectiveness of clinical simulation in improving medical competencies, such as decision-making and teamwork, which coincides with previous work. However, there is evidence of problems to be solved, such as improvements in infrastructure and teacher training to maximize its impact on medical education.

Key words:

Medical learning, Health education, Medical training, Clinical simulation, Medical competencies, Skills development.

Introduction

Medical education faces the challenge of training professionals with solid competencies through the practical application of theoretical knowledge, enabling the development of skills to address complex situations. However, practicing on real patients may pose bioethical risks that affect both patient and student safety^{1,2}.

In response to these challenges, clinical simulation (CS) emerges as an ideal educational alternative, offering a safe and controlled environment where students can acquire skills without risking harm to others^{3,4}. The greatest benefit lies in learning from errors through feedback and active, reflective learning about their actions, reinforcing self-confidence and

clinical competence^{5,6}.

The design of simulation environments involves: (a) learning tasks that integrate knowledge and skills, (b) supporting data to theoretically sustain practice and reflective analysis, (c) detailed feedback during task performance, and (d) practicing partial tasks until achieving automation⁷, through exercises resembling clinical reality⁸.

Studies in English-speaking countries highlight that CS has become a consolidated educational strategy, increasing cognitive training by 30%^{9,10}. European countries report that the use of high-fidelity mannequins and computerized simulations helps bridge the theoretical-practical gap^{11,12}. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the adoption of simulation has progressed slowly¹³. In Brazil and Mexico, incorporating simulation into academic programs has proven effective¹⁴, while in Colombia, an increase in emergency resolution skills has been documented¹⁵.

In Peru, the lack of access to real clinical practices hinders the development of essential competencies, causing simulation to remain in an expansion phase^{16,17,18}. However, it facilitates active learning, fosters critical thinking, and enables the assessment of academic performance^{19,20}. Active learning involves direct participation, critical thinking development, teamwork, effective communication, and decision-making under pressure as fundamental skills^{21,22}. Nevertheless, there is a gap in the literature, as well as a lack of trained personnel and adequate infrastructure²³.

The flexibility of clinical simulation programs allows for their implementation with optimized resources^{24,25}. Virtualized environments provide a safe setting, optimizing the learning curve and preventing privacy violations^{26,27}. Developing professional competencies is essential for ensuring safety and quality in healthcare delivery^{28,29}. This study's importance lies in determining the degree of correlation between variables, identifying their benefits, advancements, and challenges, and justifying the need to promote comprehensive learning, generating data to support the implementation of CS as an essential component of medical education³⁰.

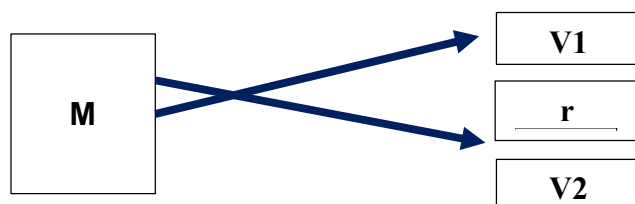
The use of simulation environments is rooted in Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984), which emphasizes the importance of learning through direct experience, as well as Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), which highlights the role of practice with social interaction and underscores the importance of debriefing³¹.

The study's research question is: What is the correlation between the use of clinical simulation strategies and the development of professional competencies in medical students at an Ecuadorian university? The objective of this study is to evaluate the correlation between the use of clinical simulation strategies and the development of professional competencies by assessing the perception of medical students at an Ecuadorian university. The hypothesis posited is that there is indeed a correlation between the use of clinical simulation strategies and the development of professional competencies.

Methodology

This study is grounded in the positivist paradigm, as it assumes an independent relationship between the individual who knows and the object to be known, adapting to the specificities of the research³². The approach was quantitative for both variables. It was a basic type of study since the researchers did not intervene to modify the study variables. The research design was non-experimental, with a descriptive, inferential, and correlational modality, and it was cross-sectional, as it was conducted at a single point in time³³.

For the methodological implementation of the research, the following formula was used:



Where it is defined as follows:

M: Population to be investigated.

V1: Variable 1: Clinical simulation.

V2: Variable 2: Clinical competencies.

r: The value of the correlational coefficient between variables.

The first variable, "Clinical Simulation," involves the artificial replication of events designed to simulate reality in a controlled, safe, and reproducible manner, where participants interact in scenarios of varying complexity, facilitating collaborative professional competence development (PCD)^{34,35}.

The proposed dimensions as a didactic instrument for the CS variable, based on the standards of the International Nursing Association for Clinical Simulation and Learning, were developed following the Cornerstones of Best Practice Program (CBPP). Four pillars of quality CS were considered: Prebriefing Dimension (pre-simulation information), Facilitation Dimension, Professional Integrity Session Dimension, and Debriefing Session Dimension³⁶.

The second variable was "Development of Professional Competencies," defined as the judicious use of knowledge, techniques, communication skills, clinical reasoning, emotional management, and values that benefit healthcare providers in solving problems of varying complexity^{37,38}.

The development of the professional profile involves acquiring three aspects: "knowing," understood as careful and regulated knowledge, referred to as the Cognitive or Intellectual Domain; "knowing how to do," meaning the acquisition of psychomotor skills, referred to as the Procedural or Psychomotor Domain; and finally, "knowing how to be," which corresponds to attitudes and values. Refining these three characteristics establishes the professional competencies to be achieved³⁹.

The universe was defined as students officially enrolled in the medical program during 2024, while the study population consisted of 93 students from the eighth and ninth semesters of the medical program at a public university in Ecuador. These students participated in sessions to provide their opinions on SC (Clinical Simulation) in relation to DPC (Development of Professional Competencies)^{40,41}.

The study technique was a survey, and the instruments used were two Likert-type questionnaires: one to evaluate SC and the other to evaluate DPC. These allowed the researchers to systematically investigate the stated problem⁴². Subsequently, the collected data was entered into Excel for tabulation and scoring. Then, SPSS 25 software was used for inferential analysis, normalization tests, and Spearman's rho correlation tests.

As a scientific endeavor to acquire new knowledge, the research was philosophically grounded in ethical conduct⁴³, adhering to values, codes, norms, and principles such as autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, and justice. The study also involved obtaining informed consent to prevent harm to third parties⁴⁴.

In this sense, the present study, titled "Impact of Clinical Simulation on the Comprehensive Development of Competencies in Medical Students," complied with ethical research standards, ensuring confidentiality, anonymity, and use solely for research purposes, with prior authorization from university authorities and informed consent from participants.

Results

Descriptive and Interpretive Analysis

Regarding students' perception of the use of clinical simulation strategies, it was found that 60% gave a high rating, perceiving it as effective in promoting active learning. However, 34% of respondents gave it a medium evaluation, indicating that there are some issues, such as lack of instructor preparation or insufficient institutional resources. Therefore, resources should be managed to allow for its proper implementation (see Table No. 1). These data are consistent with what is reported in the literature as positive but highlight deficiencies in resources, infrastructure, and training needed to maximize its benefits^{45,46}.

Table No. 1. Rating Scales for the Clinical Simulation Variable with Its Dimensions

| CLINICAL SIMULATION | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|--|
| LEVELS | PREBRIEFING | | FACILITATION | | INTEGRITY | | DEBRIEFING | | SIMULATION | | |
| | FREQUEN CY | PERCENT AGE | FREQUEN CY | PERCENT AGE | FREQUEN CY | PERCENT AGE | FREQUEN CY | PERCENT AGE | FREQUEN CY | PERCENT AGE | |
| LOW | 8 | 9 % | 7 | 8 % | 6 | 6 % | 9 | 10 % | 5 | 5 % | |
| MEDIUM | 40 | 43 % | 28 | 30 % | 33 | 35 % | 23 | 25 % | 32 | 34 % | |
| HIGH | 45 | 48 % | 58 | 62 % | 54 | 58 % | 61 | 66 % | 56 | 60 % | |
| TOTAL | 93 | 100 % | 93 | 100 % | 93 | 100 % | 93 | 100 % | 93 | 100 % | |

Source: Survey conducted with medical students

Prepared by: The authors

The respondents considered that the prior preparation (prebriefing) is adequate, but they pointed out that it needs to be improved; this is reflected in the parity between a high rating (48%) and a medium rating (43%); a result similar to studies that emphasize the importance of setting clear expectations and emotionally and cognitively preparing the participants ⁴⁷.

Regarding the Facilitation dimension, 62% of students rated it at a high level, and 30% at a medium level, demonstrating that the instructor's participation during the simulation is necessary, and their interaction should be improved to optimize the learning experience, a result that aligns with literature highlighting their role as facilitators for meaningful learning ⁴⁸.

The Debriefing phase was rated positively, with 66% at a high level and only 10% indicating a low level, highlighting the effectiveness of post-simulation reflection to consolidate learning and provide feedback ⁴⁹. Medium and low ratings suggest there is still room to optimize the debriefing technique, through continuous training of facilitators in feedback strategies ⁵⁰.

Table No. 2. Scales of the Variable Professional Competence Development with its Dimensions.

| PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|
| COGNITIVE | | | ATTITUDINAL | | PROCEDURAL | | COMPETENCIES | |
| LEVELS | FREQUEN CY | PERCENT AGE | FREQUEN CY | PERCENT AGE | FREQUEN CY | PERCENT AGE | FREQUEN CY | PERCENT AGE |
| LOW | 3 | 3% | 3 | 3% | 3 | 3% | 3 | 3% |
| MEDIUM | 24 | 26% | 16 | 17% | 25 | 27% | 20 | 22% |
| HIGH | 66 | 71% | 74 | 80% | 65 | 70% | 70 | 75% |
| TOTAL | 93 | 100% | 93 | 100% | 93 | 100% | 93 | 100% |

Source: Survey conducted with medical students

Prepared by: The authors

The results of the variable Professional Competency Development document a very satisfactory evaluation, with 75% rating it as high level, which reflects a positive impact of simulation in strengthening competencies. However, there is

still a significant group of respondents, 22%, with some level of dissatisfaction, rating the development of competencies at a medium level (see Table No. 2). This could suggest the existence of certain difficulties in perceiving the achievements made, possibly due to variability in the quality of the simulations or the insufficiency of practical sessions⁵¹; a review of regional research shows a similar trend in the perception of simulation effectiveness for competency development⁵².

Table No. 3. Analysis of Normality Tests

| | Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a | | | Shapiro-Wilk | | |
|--|---------------------------------|----|--------|--------------|----|-------|
| | Statistic | gl | Sig. | Statistic | gl | Sig. |
| <i>Evaluation of the First Variable Clinical Simulation</i> | 0,059 | 93 | 0,200* | 0,965 | 93 | 0,014 |
| <i>Evaluation of the Second Variable Professional Competencies</i> | 0,138 | 93 | 0,000 | 0,902 | 93 | 0,000 |
| * This is the lower bound of the true significance. a. Lilliefors significance correction Normality value 0.05 | | | | | | |

Source: Survey conducted with medical students

Prepared by: The authors

Given that the study sample consists of 93 students, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test was used to verify whether the two study variables follow a normal distribution, i.e., to determine if the obtained values are concentrated around the mean. To do this, we set the null hypothesis as H_0 = the entered data follows a normal distribution, and the alternative hypothesis as H_1 = the entered data does not follow a normal distribution. The confidence level was set at 0.95, and α was set at 0.05 as the margin of error or significance level. For the statistical test, it was considered that if the p-value is < 0.05 , we reject H_0 and accept H_1 , meaning that the data does not follow a normal distribution. If the p-value is > 0.05 , we accept H_0 and reject H_1 , meaning we consider the data to follow a normal distribution (see Table N° 3).

Once these considerations were defined, we analyzed the first variable, clinical simulation strategies. Statistic 0.059; df 93; Sig 0.200; the normality p-value allowed us to identify that the p-value Sig 0.200, which is greater than 0.05, so we accept the null hypothesis and conclude that the data follows a normal distribution. When analyzing the second variable, development of professional competencies, we found that the p-value was Sig 0.000, which is less than 0.05. Therefore, we do not accept the null hypothesis and conclude that it does not follow a normal distribution. This means that the values of the dependent random variable do not follow a normal distribution in the population from which the sample was taken.

In this case, since variable 1 showed a normal distribution and variable 2 showed a non-normal distribution, we concluded that this implies variations in the perceptual homogeneity of the students. Since neither of the two variables follows a symmetric distribution, this difference in distributions may be due to the diversity in prior exposure to similar teaching methods or the context of the students. Therefore, we decided to use a non-parametric statistic, specifically the Spearman correlation test⁵³.

Table N° 4. Spearman Non-Parametric Correlation

| | | Evaluation of the First Variable: Clinical Simulation | Evaluation of the Second Variable: Professional Competencies |
|--|-------------------------|---|--|
| | Spearman's Rho | | |
| Evaluation of the First Variable: Clinical Simulation | Correlation Coefficient | 1,000 | 0,641** |
| | Sig. (bilateral) | . | 0,000 |
| | N | 93 | 93 |
| Evaluation of the Second Variable: Professional Competencies | Correlation Coefficient | 0,641** | 1,000 |
| | Sig. (bilateral) | 0,000 | . |
| | N | 93 | 93 |

** . The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (bilateral).

Source: Interpretative analysis of the results obtained in the Spearman correlation for the variables "Clinical Simulation" and "Professional Competencies" using SPSS 25

Prepared by: The authors

The Spearman correlation measures the degree of association between the two variables, with the null hypothesis H_0 = that there is no correlation between variables 1 and 2; and the alternative hypothesis H_1 = that there is a correlation between the two variables. The confidence level was set at 0.95 and α at 0.05 (margin of error). For the test statistic, it was considered that if the p-value is < 0.05 , the null hypothesis is rejected, accepting H_1 , meaning that a correlation exists, and if the p-value is > 0.05 , the null hypothesis is accepted, rejecting H_1 , meaning there is no correlation.

Once these considerations were defined for both variables, in the analysis of the Spearman Rho correlation coefficient 0.641** Sig. (bilateral) 0.000, i.e., a $p < 0.01$, N 93, we rejected the null hypothesis and accepted the alternative hypothesis, which allows establishing a significant correlation at the bilateral level; this provides evidence of a moderate-high positive correlation between the variables "Clinical Simulation Strategies" and "Development of Professional Competencies"; this means that as the perception of clinical simulation improves, the development of professional competencies also increases, implying a strong relationship, although not perfect, suggesting the need to address additional factors to maximize the simulation results ⁵⁴.

Table No. 5. Interpretation of the Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient (Rho)

| | | | | | | | | | |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Very strong negative correlation | Strong negative correlation | Moderate negative correlation | Weak negative correlation | Very weak negative correlation | Very weak positive correlation | Weak positive correlation | Moderate positive correlation | Strong positive correlation | Very strong positive correlation |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|

| | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------|------|----------|-----|----------|----------|-----|----------|------|-----------|------|------|----|
| Very high | High | Moderate | Low | Very low | Very low | Low | Moderate | High | Very high | | | |
| -1 | -0,8 | -0,6 | | -0,4 | -0,2 | 0 | +0,2 | +0,4 | | +0,6 | +0,8 | +1 |
| INVERSE | | | | | DIRECT | | | | | | | |

The hypothesis test for the correlation of the variables 'simulation strategies' and 'clinical competencies development' used a non-parametric correlation test = Spearman's Rho coefficient, where it is observed that the value for both variables is 0.641. According to the correlation coefficient interpretation table, a strong positive correlation exists, indicating a high direct relationship (see Table No. 5).

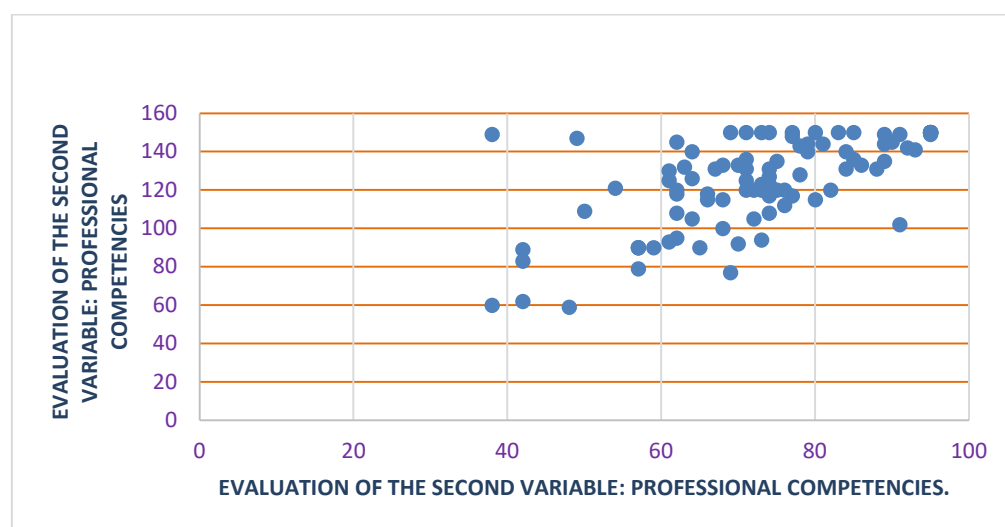


Figure No. 1. Correlation between the variables.

Source: SPSS 25

Prepared by: The authors.

Furthermore, since the Spearman correlation hypothesis test confirmed that there is a significant relationship ($p < 0.05$) between the variables Clinical Simulation Strategies and Professional Competencies Development, it confirms that clinical simulation strategies positively influence the development of competencies. Therefore, it should be considered a key curricular component, through careful planning and continuous improvement, ensuring that students can benefit equitably⁵⁵.

Discussion

The results obtained document the effectiveness of simulation strategies in professional training, aligning with recent literature and highlighting both the similarities and discrepancies with previous research, showing a positive impact on key competencies such as clinical decision-making, teamwork, and proficiency in medical procedures, fostering comprehensive learning compared to traditional education⁵⁶. However, some aspects were perceived as average, reflecting challenges that require attention to maximize their effectiveness.

Both variables were mostly rated at a high level, confirming the positive impact of simulation in medical education⁵⁷. This reinforces the need to integrate it into the curriculum, as it promotes active learning that improves the acquisition of practical skills in a safe environment, increases self-confidence, and enhances the retention of knowledge and research skills⁵⁸.

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test revealed differences in the distribution of the variables, justifying the use of

non-parametric statistical tests, ensuring the validity of the results⁵⁹.

The Prebriefing dimension was rated at a high level, highlighting its importance in preparing students emotionally and cognitively, although the average ratings suggest improving communication and expectations during this phase⁶⁰.

The Facilitation dimension, recognized as key for guiding reflective and critical learning, was mostly rated high, but with indications of the need for formative improvement and standardization to optimize its effectiveness⁶¹.

The Debriefing was categorized as one of the most effective phases, with a high rating level, standing out for consolidating learning and promoting self-assessment, in line with previous studies⁶².

A moderate-high positive correlation ($p < 0.001$) was confirmed between clinical simulation and competency development, with high-fidelity simulations and advanced technologies being highlighted as tools that promote comprehensive learning, consistent with research by Cant and Cooper⁶³.

Study limitations include a small sample size, a cross-sectional design that prevents the evaluation of competency evolution, uncontrolled factors such as students' prior experience, and biases from self-perception that may influence the assessment of strategies.

Recommendations

Due to all these factors, the following suggestions are made:

1. Clinical Simulation Program: Implement a clinical simulation program that applies continuous improvements with feedback.
2. Standardization of Methods Applied in Simulation: A consensus should be promoted on the evaluation protocols in clinical simulation to ensure the comparability of results and their replication.
3. Instructor Training: Ensure that instructors are adequately trained in the implementation and facilitation of complex simulations.
4. Technological Integration: Implement advanced technologies to simulate high-complexity situations.
5. Individual Evaluation of Participants: This suggests the need for longitudinal and multicenter studies to assess the evolution of competency development over time and reduce biases.
6. Encourage Research: Conduct long-term longitudinal studies to evaluate the sustained impact in different educational contexts, refining clinical simulation strategies and maximizing medical education, ensuring that students acquire the necessary competencies for successful and safe professional practice.

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