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PERSPECTIVE

Ubuntu in healthcare simulation

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ABSTRACT

Healthcare simulation is often described through the language of competence, fidelity, performance, mastery and outcomes. While these concepts remain central to simulation-based education, they may insufficiently capture the relational and communal dimensions of clinical learning, particularly in contexts where healthcare is deeply shaped by social, cultural and resource realities. This Perspectives piece reflects on Ubuntu, a philosophy rooted in many African traditions, meaning 'a person is a person through other persons', as a philosophical lens for healthcare simulation. Ubuntu offers a way of understanding simulation not only as a method for developing individual clinical competence, but also as a communal practice through which learners rehearse dignity, responsibility, interdependence and care. Through this lens, technical performance is necessary but incomplete if it is disconnected from the humanity of patients, families, colleagues and communities. Ubuntu therefore deepens the meaning of competence by situating it within relationships. The article considers how Ubuntu may shape simulation design, debriefing, feedback and resource-conscious practice. In debriefing, Ubuntu frames reflection as a relational act in which facilitators hold space for learners to make meaning together after the vulnerability of performance. In feedback, Ubuntu supports an approach that is both compassionate and rigorous, affirming the learner's dignity while taking seriously their responsibility to patients and colleagues. In resource-constrained settings, Ubuntu invites educators to recognize the value of people, relationships, creativity and community, while also cautioning against romanticizing scarcity or using Ubuntu to justify inadequate institutional investment. By positioning Ubuntu as more than a cultural reference or African add-on, this piece argues that it can contribute meaningfully to global conversations in healthcare simulation. Ubuntu reminds simulation educators that the goal is not only to produce practitioners who can perform under pressure, but to form practitioners who understand that performance matters because people matter.

Simulation is frequently described through the language of competence, fidelity, performance, mastery and outcomes. These concepts are important. They help us design purposeful learning activities and evaluate whether learning has taken place. Yet, if this is the only language we use, simulation can become too easily reduced to the performance of an individual learner in front of a manikin, a checklist or a facilitator. Research on clinical assessment has shown that binary checklists may fail to capture increasing expertise [1]. Ubuntu, a philosophy rooted in southern African traditions, offers a relational perspective, often expressed as 'a person is a person through other persons'. It understands personhood through our relationships and responsibilities to others [2].

Ubuntu asks us to look again, by considering its implications for learning and competence, debriefing and feedback, and finally resource-conscious practice.

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In the simulation room, no learner becomes clinically competent alone. Learning is shaped by the patient, even when the patient is simulated. It is shaped by peers, facilitators, technicians, actors, families, communities and the systems in which care takes place. This resonates with situated learning theory, which reminds us that learning is not simply the acquisition of knowledge by an individual, but participation in a social practice [3]. A learner may practise an airway skill, lead a resuscitation or disclose bad news, but each of these acts only finds meaning within relationships. The question is therefore not only, 'Did the learner perform the task correctly?' It is also, 'How did this learner recognise the humanity of others while performing the task?'

Ubuntu does not reject competence. It deepens it. A technically correct performance that ignores the dignity of the patient, silences the nurse, dismisses the family or fails to recognize contextual realities is incomplete. Healthcare simulation has long understood that clinical practice involves more than procedural accuracy. It involves communication, teamwork, situational awareness, leadership and judgement [4]. Ubuntu extends this further by reminding us that these are not simply non-technical skills. They are expressions of our shared humanity [2].

This also has implications for debriefing. Debriefing is often described as a structured conversation that promotes reflection and learning. Through an Ubuntu lens, it also becomes a relational act. The facilitator does not merely extract learning points from participants. The facilitator holds a space where participants can think together, make meaning together and restore connection after the vulnerability of performance. Simulation exposes people. It reveals uncertainty, hesitation, error, emotion and hierarchy. Ubuntu reminds us that the learner who struggles in simulation is not a failed performer, but a person in formation.

This does not mean that feedback should become soft or evasive. Ubuntu is not politeness. It is not the avoidance of difficult truth. In fact, Ubuntu carries a deep sense of responsibility. To affirm someone's humanity is to take their growth seriously. In simulation, this means that feedback can be both compassionate and rigorous. It can say: you belong here, your learning matters and because patients and colleagues depend on you, we must examine this moment honestly.

This relational view resonates with psychological safety, supported from the pre-simulation briefing through clear expectations and a demonstrated commitment to respect [5]. It also aligns with debriefing with good judgement, in which facilitators combine explicit observations and concerns with curiosity about participants' reasoning [6]. An Ubuntu-informed application might ask: 'I noticed that the nurse's concern was not acknowledged. I was concerned that an important perspective was lost. What was happening for you at that moment?' Inviting the nurse's perspective can then help the team explore whose voice was heard and how they might respond differently. Ubuntu gives these practices an ethical orientation towards dignity and mutual responsibility [2].

Ubuntu is also important in resource-constrained simulation settings. In many African contexts, simulation educators work with limited equipment, limited funding and limited institutional support [7]. These realities are often described only through deficit. We speak of what is absent, unaffordable or unavailable. Ubuntu invites a different starting point. It asks us to recognize the educational resources already present in people, relationships, creativity and community. It values co-creation, mutual support and locally responsive innovation [8]. It reminds us that simulation can be high-impact without always being high-cost.

However, Ubuntu should not be romanticized. It should not be used to suggest that African contexts are naturally harmonious or that goodwill can replace proper investment. Ubuntu must not become a justification for expecting educators to do more with less indefinitely. If taken seriously, Ubuntu should challenge institutions to build systems that honour human dignity, including the dignity of educators, learners, simulated participants, technicians and patients.

Educational work often happens in the relationships around it. One person leads. Another assists. Someone observes. Someone feels uncertain. Someone offers support. Someone notices what others miss. Together, they practise not only how to act, but also how to be with and for one another.

Healthcare simulation is often described as a safe space to practise before encountering real patients. Ubuntu asks us to go further. It asks simulation to become a humane space where learners rehearse responsibility, dignity and collective care. It asks us to form practitioners who not only perform under pressure, but who remember that performance matters because people matter.

When viewed through Ubuntu, simulation is not merely a method for producing competent individuals. It is a communal practice through which we become more fully human together.

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