Keywords
Simulation-based education; Clinical decision-making; Medical interns; Clinical reasoning; Medical education; Patient safety; High-fidelity simulation; Experiential learning.

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Received: 17-06-2026
Revised: 22-07-2026
Accepted: 24-07-2026
Doi: 10.1922/ejprd.v34i7s.1630

European Journal of Prosthodontics and Restorative Dentistry (2026) 34(7s), 391-401

Impact of Simulation-Based Training on Clinical Decision-Making Skills Among Medical Interns

Abstract
Background: Clinical decision-making (CDM) represents one of the most essential competencies expected of medical interns as they transition from supervised undergraduate education to independent clinical practice. Newly graduated physicians frequently encounter challenges in integrating theoretical knowledge with practical patient care, often resulting in diagnostic uncertainty, delayed management, and increased risk of medical errors. Simulation-based training (SBT) has emerged as a transformative educational strategy capable of providing realistic, risk-free environments in which interns can repeatedly practice clinical reasoning, procedural skills, communication, teamwork, and crisis resource management before caring for actual patients. Advances in high-fidelity simulation, standardized patient encounters, virtual reality, augmented reality, and computer-based simulation have significantly expanded opportunities for experiential learning across multiple clinical disciplines.
Objective: This narrative review aims to comprehensively examine current evidence regarding the impact of simulation-based training on clinical decision-making skills among medical interns, explore the educational mechanisms underlying its effectiveness, identify factors influencing learning outcomes, discuss existing limitations, and provide recommendations for future educational practice and research.
Methods: A narrative review methodology was adopted to synthesize evidence from peer-reviewed literature published primarily between 2010 and 2026. Major electronic databases including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, MEDLINE, and ERIC were searched using combinations of keywords related to simulation-based education, clinical decision-making, medical interns, clinical reasoning, and patient safety. Landmark earlier studies were included where appropriate because of their historical importance in simulation research. Studies involving undergraduate medical education, internship training, residency transition, and workplace-based simulation were critically evaluated and integrated into a comprehensive narrative synthesis.
Results: Current literature consistently demonstrates that simulation-based training improves clinical decision-making by enhancing diagnostic reasoning, prioritization of critically ill patients, recognition of deteriorating conditions, communication skills, teamwork, leadership, confidence, and cognitive integration under stressful clinical conditions. Repeated deliberate practice combined with structured debriefing appears to produce sustained improvements in clinical judgment and patient safety outcomes. Nevertheless, considerable heterogeneity exists regarding simulation modalities, assessment instruments, intervention duration, and long-term outcome evaluation.
Conclusion: Simulation-based training has become an indispensable component of contemporary medical education. When integrated longitudinally into internship curricula and supported by evidence-based debriefing, simulation substantially enhances clinical decision-making while promoting safer patient care. Future research should emphasize standardized assessment methods, multicenter randomized studies, cost-effectiveness analyses, and long-term evaluation of knowledge retention and patient outcomes.

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INTRODUCTION

Clinical decision-making (CDM) is widely regarded as one of the defining competencies of competent physicians and forms the foundation of safe, effective, and patient-centered healthcare. Every clinical encounter requires physicians to integrate biomedical knowledge, interpret diagnostic information, evaluate patient preferences, prioritize competing clinical problems, estimate risks and benefits, and formulate management strategies under varying degrees of uncertainty. For medical interns, who are transitioning from undergraduate medical education to frontline clinical responsibilities, this process represents one of the greatest educational and professional challenges. Unlike classroom-based learning, internship requires rapid application of theoretical knowledge to complex patient scenarios characterized by incomplete information, evolving clinical conditions, time pressure, and multidisciplinary collaboration. Consequently, deficiencies in clinical decision-making during internship may directly contribute to diagnostic errors, inappropriate investigations, delayed interventions, inefficient resource utilization, and compromised patient safety [1].

The transition from medical student to practicing physician has historically been described as a vulnerable period within medical education. Numerous studies have demonstrated that newly graduated doctors frequently report feeling insufficiently prepared for independent clinical practice despite satisfactory academic performance during medical school [2]. This perceived gap between theoretical knowledge and clinical competence reflects limitations inherent in traditional educational approaches, which have historically emphasized factual knowledge acquisition rather than experiential learning, clinical reasoning, and adaptive expertise. Conventional bedside teaching, although invaluable, is constrained by variability in patient presentations, concerns regarding patient safety, restricted opportunities for repeated practice, and inconsistent supervision. As healthcare systems become increasingly complex, reliance solely on apprenticeship-based learning has become insufficient to ensure consistent development of competent clinical decision-makers.

Clinical decision-making itself is an intricate cognitive process involving multiple interacting domains. Physicians continuously gather information through history taking, physical examination, laboratory investigations, diagnostic imaging, and communication with healthcare professionals. These data are subsequently synthesized through pattern recognition, analytical reasoning, probabilistic thinking, and evidence-based medicine to generate differential diagnoses and therapeutic plans. Cognitive psychologists frequently distinguish between intuitive (System 1) thinking, characterized by rapid pattern recognition, and analytical (System 2) reasoning, which involves deliberate, logical evaluation of available evidence [3]. Expert clinicians demonstrate the ability to flexibly transition between these cognitive systems depending on clinical complexity. In contrast, novice physicians often rely excessively on analytical reasoning because of limited illness scripts and clinical experience, increasing cognitive workload and vulnerability to decision fatigue.

Clinical reasoning errors remain among the leading contributors to preventable adverse events worldwide. Diagnostic inaccuracies account for a substantial proportion of medical errors across emergency medicine, internal medicine, surgery, pediatrics, and critical care [4]. Many of these errors occur during the earliest stages of physician practice when clinical experience remains limited. Factors contributing to poor decision-making include inadequate exposure to uncommon diseases, insufficient experience managing emergencies, ineffective communication, cognitive biases, interruptions, stress, fatigue, and limited opportunities for reflective practice. Therefore, educational interventions capable of accelerating experiential learning while maintaining patient safety have become increasingly important priorities within modern medical education.

Simulation-based training (SBT) has emerged over the past three decades as one of the most influential innovations in healthcare education. Initially developed for aviation and military training, simulation has been progressively adapted to medicine because of its ability to recreate realistic clinical environments without exposing patients to unnecessary risk [5]. Modern simulation encompasses a diverse spectrum of educational modalities, including high-fidelity computerized mannequins, standardized patients, task trainers, hybrid simulation, screen-based virtual patients, immersive virtual reality, augmented reality, serious gaming, and in situ simulation conducted within authentic clinical environments. Each modality offers unique educational advantages while collectively promoting experiential learning through deliberate practice, structured feedback, and repeated performance.

The educational philosophy underlying simulation-based learning differs fundamentally from traditional didactic teaching. Rather than emphasizing passive acquisition of information, simulation encourages active participation in authentic clinical scenarios requiring learners to assess patients, formulate differential diagnoses, prioritize investigations, initiate treatment, communicate with team members, respond to evolving clinical deterioration, and subsequently reflect upon their performance during structured debriefing sessions. These educational experiences strengthen integration of cognitive knowledge, psychomotor skills, behavioral competencies, and professional attitudes within realistic clinical contexts [6].

Medical interns constitute an especially important target population for simulation-based education. During internship, learners assume substantially greater clinical responsibilities while simultaneously adapting to hospital workflows, multidisciplinary communication, emergency response, and autonomous decision-making. This period is characterized by rapid professional development but also considerable psychological stress, uncertainty, and increased susceptibility to errors. Simulation provides interns with psychologically safe learning environments in which mistakes become valuable educational opportunities rather than threats to patient wellbeing. Repeated exposure to challenging clinical scenarios enables learners to develop confidence, resilience, situational awareness, prioritization strategies, and adaptive expertise before encountering similar situations in actual clinical practice [7].

Several educational theories help explain the effectiveness of simulation in improving clinical decision-making. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory proposes that meaningful learning occurs through a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Simulation naturally incorporates all four stages by allowing learners to experience realistic clinical scenarios, reflect during debriefing, integrate conceptual understanding, and subsequently apply improved strategies in future scenarios [8]. Similarly, Ericsson's theory of deliberate practice emphasizes repeated performance, immediate feedback, correction of errors, and progressively increasing difficulty as essential mechanisms underlying expert performance. Simulation uniquely facilitates deliberate practice because clinical scenarios can be standardized, repeated indefinitely, and adapted to learner competence without compromising patient safety [9].

Another important theoretical framework involves Cognitive Load Theory, which recognizes that novice clinicians possess limited working memory capacity when processing complex clinical information. Simulation enables educators to progressively increase scenario complexity while optimizing cognitive load and minimizing unnecessary distractions. Through repeated exposure, learners gradually automate routine cognitive processes, thereby freeing cognitive resources for higher-order reasoning and clinical judgment [10]. In addition, the concept of situated learning emphasizes that knowledge acquired within authentic contexts is more likely to transfer successfully into real clinical environments. High-fidelity simulation recreates many contextual features of actual healthcare delivery, thereby promoting meaningful knowledge transfer and improved decision-making during genuine patient encounters.

The expansion of simulation technologies has also coincided with growing emphasis on competency-based medical education (CBME). Contemporary educational frameworks increasingly prioritize demonstrable competencies rather than time-based training. Clinical decision-making represents one of the core competencies assessed within CBME because it directly influences diagnostic accuracy, therapeutic effectiveness, interprofessional collaboration, patient communication, professionalism, and healthcare quality. Simulation offers standardized opportunities to assess these competencies objectively across learners while reducing variability associated with traditional workplace-based assessments [11].

Evidence accumulated over the past two decades increasingly supports the educational value of simulation across numerous specialties including emergency medicine, anesthesiology, surgery, pediatrics, obstetrics, intensive care, and family medicine. Meta-analyses have consistently demonstrated improvements in procedural competence, teamwork, communication, confidence, knowledge retention, and technical performance following simulation-based interventions [6,12]. More recently, attention has shifted toward higher-order cognitive outcomes, particularly clinical reasoning and decision-making. Although multiple systematic reviews suggest favorable effects, considerable heterogeneity remains regarding simulation modalities, educational design, outcome measures, duration of benefits, and translation into real-world clinical practice. Furthermore, relatively few reviews specifically focus on medical interns, who represent a uniquely vulnerable population during the transition from undergraduate education to independent patient care.

The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated global adoption of simulation-based education as restrictions on clinical placements necessitated alternative methods of experiential learning. Virtual simulation, telesimulation, and digital patient platforms expanded rapidly, demonstrating that simulation could remain effective even when face-to-face instruction was limited [13]. These developments have fundamentally reshaped medical education and highlighted the potential for integrating technology-enhanced learning into routine internship training.

Given the continuing expansion of simulation technologies, increasing emphasis on patient safety, and growing expectations for competency-based education, understanding the relationship between simulation-based training and clinical decision-making among medical interns has become increasingly important. A comprehensive synthesis of current evidence is therefore necessary to inform educators, curriculum developers, healthcare institutions, and policymakers regarding best practices for integrating simulation into internship programs.

Accordingly, the objective of this narrative review is to critically examine the current evidence regarding the impact of simulation-based training on clinical decision-making skills among medical interns, explore the educational mechanisms responsible for observed improvements, evaluate different simulation modalities and assessment strategies, identify existing limitations within the literature, and propose recommendations for future educational practice and research.

METHODS

This narrative review was conducted to critically synthesize the current literature regarding the impact of simulation-based training (SBT) on clinical decision-making (CDM) among medical interns. Unlike systematic reviews that aim to answer narrowly focused clinical questions, narrative reviews allow comprehensive exploration of complex educational interventions, conceptual frameworks, and heterogeneous evidence. This approach was selected because simulation-based education encompasses diverse educational theories, multiple simulation modalities, varied assessment instruments, and numerous clinical settings that cannot easily be synthesized through quantitative meta-analysis alone.

Relevant literature was identified through comprehensive searches of PubMed/MEDLINE, Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar using combinations of the following keywords: simulation-based education, simulation-based training, clinical decision-making, clinical reasoning, medical interns, undergraduate medical education, medical simulation, high-fidelity simulation, virtual patients, clinical competence, and patient safety. Landmark publications before 2010 were included because of their historical contribution to simulation theory, whereas priority was given to peer-reviewed studies published between 2015 and 2026. Studies involving undergraduate medical students, interns, junior physicians, and transition-to-practice programs were considered when they evaluated outcomes related to clinical reasoning, decision-making, diagnostic performance, teamwork, or patient safety. Review articles, randomized controlled trials, quasi-experimental studies, multicenter educational interventions, consensus statements, and simulation guidelines were critically examined.

Because of methodological heterogeneity among simulation interventions, outcome measures, and educational settings, findings were synthesized narratively rather than statistically. Particular emphasis was placed on identifying recurring educational themes, mechanisms underlying learning, strengths and limitations of current evidence, and implications for internship training. Recent reviews consistently emphasize that effective simulation programs depend not only on simulation fidelity but also on evidence-based scenario design, structured debriefing, and deliberate practice.

2. SIMULATION-BASED MEDICAL EDUCATION

Simulation-based medical education (SBME) has undergone remarkable evolution over the past three decades, transitioning from an adjunctive instructional method to a cornerstone of contemporary medical education. Initially adapted from the aviation industry's safety training model, simulation was introduced into healthcare to provide clinicians with opportunities to develop technical proficiency and non-technical competencies in environments that eliminate the risk of patient harm. Today, simulation is recognized not merely as a teaching modality but as a comprehensive educational strategy that integrates experiential learning, deliberate practice, reflective feedback, competency-based assessment, and systems improvement. These characteristics have established simulation as one of the most influential innovations in healthcare education worldwide [1–5].

The increasing complexity of modern healthcare has significantly altered expectations of newly graduated physicians. Medical interns are now expected to demonstrate competence in diagnostic reasoning, prioritization, communication, teamwork, procedural skills, leadership, and crisis management immediately upon entering clinical practice. However, several international surveys have consistently demonstrated that many graduates perceive themselves as insufficiently prepared for independent clinical responsibilities, particularly in emergency decision-making and management of critically ill patients [6–8]. This discrepancy reflects the limitations of traditional apprenticeship-based education, in which exposure to important clinical conditions depends largely on patient availability, service demands, and supervisor experience rather than standardized educational objectives [7,8]. Consequently, simulation-based education has emerged as an effective solution for bridging the persistent gap between theoretical knowledge and practical clinical competence.

Unlike traditional lecture-based instruction, simulation emphasizes experiential learning in authentic clinical contexts. Rather than passively receiving information, learners actively participate in realistic patient encounters that require collection of clinical information, formulation of differential diagnoses, interpretation of investigations, prioritization of management strategies, communication with patients and healthcare professionals, and continuous reassessment of evolving clinical situations. This learner-centered approach facilitates integration of cognitive knowledge with psychomotor skills and professional behaviors, thereby promoting deeper learning and improved knowledge retention [1,4,9]. Contemporary evidence further suggests that simulation contributes not only to immediate educational outcomes but also to sustained behavioral changes that translate into improved clinical performance and patient safety.

McGaghie and colleagues proposed that effective simulation programs share several defining characteristics, including structured feedback, deliberate practice, curriculum integration, mastery learning, repetitive practice, outcome measurement, appropriate simulation fidelity, transfer to clinical practice, team training, instructor preparation, and standardized assessment [2,10]. These principles remain central to modern simulation curricula and have been repeatedly validated across multiple healthcare disciplines. Recent narrative reviews continue to emphasize that the educational effectiveness of simulation depends far more on instructional design than on the sophistication or technological complexity of the simulator itself. Well-designed learning objectives, evidence-based scenario development, psychologically safe learning environments, and high-quality debriefing consistently demonstrate greater influence on learning outcomes than simulator fidelity alone.

An important distinction should be made between simulation as a technology and simulation as a pedagogy. Although high-fidelity mannequins and virtual reality systems often attract considerable attention, the educational value of simulation lies primarily in the cognitive processes they facilitate rather than the technology itself. Learners develop expertise through repeated cycles of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application rather than through exposure to sophisticated equipment alone. Consequently, low-cost simulation interventions, when combined with effective facilitation and structured debriefing, may achieve educational outcomes comparable to those obtained using considerably more expensive technologies [3,11].

Simulation also aligns closely with competency-based medical education (CBME), which emphasizes demonstration of observable clinical competencies instead of completion of predetermined training periods. Competencies such as clinical reasoning, leadership, communication, professionalism, and crisis resource management are difficult to evaluate consistently during routine clinical placements because patient encounters vary considerably between learners. Simulation overcomes this limitation by providing standardized clinical scenarios in which all participants encounter identical challenges under controlled conditions. Consequently, educators can objectively compare learner performance while ensuring equitable educational opportunities [10,12].

Beyond individual competence, simulation increasingly contributes to organizational patient safety initiatives. In situ simulation, conducted within actual clinical environments using multidisciplinary healthcare teams, has become an effective strategy for identifying latent safety threats, communication failures, equipment deficiencies, and workflow problems before they contribute to adverse patient outcomes. Thus, simulation has evolved from a purely educational intervention into an important component of healthcare quality improvement and systems-based practice [13,14].

3. EDUCATIONAL THEORIES SUPPORTING SIMULATION-BASED CLINICAL DECISION-MAKING

The educational effectiveness of simulation-based training is grounded in several complementary theories of adult learning and cognitive psychology. Collectively, these frameworks explain why experiential simulation produces greater improvements in clinical reasoning and decision-making than passive instructional methods.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory remains the most widely accepted conceptual framework underpinning healthcare simulation [15]. According to Kolb, learning occurs through four interconnected stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Simulation naturally reproduces this cycle. During a simulated clinical encounter, interns experience realistic patient scenarios requiring immediate clinical decisions. Following scenario completion, structured debriefing encourages reflection on actions, reasoning processes, and outcomes. Learners subsequently integrate new conceptual understanding before applying improved strategies during future simulation exercises or actual patient care. Repeated progression through this experiential cycle strengthens clinical reasoning, adaptive expertise, and professional confidence [15,16].

Ericsson's theory of deliberate practice provides another essential theoretical foundation [17]. Unlike repetitive experience alone, deliberate practice requires clearly defined learning objectives, focused attention, immediate feedback, correction of errors, and repeated performance until mastery is achieved. Simulation uniquely facilitates deliberate practice because identical clinical scenarios can be repeated multiple times without exposing patients to unnecessary risk. This opportunity rarely exists in conventional clinical education, where patient presentations are unpredictable and opportunities for repetition are limited. Numerous studies have demonstrated that simulation programs incorporating deliberate practice achieve significantly greater improvements in diagnostic reasoning, procedural competence, and clinical decision-making than programs relying on single-exposure educational experiences [2,17,18].

Cognitive Load Theory further explains the effectiveness of simulation among novice physicians. Medical interns frequently experience cognitive overload when simultaneously interpreting clinical information, recalling biomedical knowledge, communicating with patients, coordinating healthcare teams, and making therapeutic decisions. Working memory possesses finite processing capacity, and excessive cognitive demands impair clinical reasoning. Simulation enables educators to progressively increase scenario complexity while controlling extraneous cognitive load. As routine clinical processes become increasingly automated through repeated simulation, greater cognitive resources become available for higher-order analytical reasoning, diagnostic hypothesis generation, and anticipatory clinical thinking [19].

Situated Learning Theory likewise supports simulation-based education by emphasizing that knowledge develops most effectively within authentic social and environmental contexts [20]. Traditional classroom instruction often separates biomedical knowledge from clinical application, whereas simulation embeds learning within realistic patient encounters. Learners therefore acquire knowledge in the same contextual framework in which it will ultimately be applied, thereby facilitating transfer of learning into real clinical environments. This contextual authenticity is particularly important for medical interns because their transition into clinical practice requires simultaneous integration of scientific knowledge, communication, professionalism, teamwork, and decision-making under realistic workplace conditions.

Contemporary models of clinical reasoning also support simulation-based education. Dual-process theories propose that physicians alternate between intuitive pattern recognition (System 1) and analytical reasoning (System 2) depending upon clinical complexity [21]. Novice physicians rely predominantly on analytical reasoning because they possess relatively limited illness scripts and pattern recognition capabilities. Through repeated exposure to simulated patient encounters representing common and uncommon diseases, interns progressively develop richer illness scripts that facilitate faster recognition of clinical patterns while preserving analytical reasoning for more complex diagnostic problems. Simulation therefore accelerates development of expert clinical reasoning by simultaneously strengthening intuitive recognition and analytical reflection.

Recent literature further emphasizes the importance of metacognition within simulation-based education. Structured debriefing encourages learners to examine not only what decisions they made but why those decisions were made. Such reflective practice promotes awareness of cognitive biases including anchoring, premature closure, confirmation bias, and availability bias, all of which contribute substantially to diagnostic error among novice clinicians. Consequently, simulation enhances clinical reasoning by strengthening learners' ability to monitor, evaluate, and regulate their own thinking processes.

4. TYPES OF SIMULATION USED IN MEDICAL INTERNSHIP TRAINING

Simulation-based education encompasses multiple educational modalities that differ in technological sophistication, educational objectives, cost, and fidelity. Selection of an appropriate simulation modality depends upon curriculum objectives rather than technological complexity alone.

Low-fidelity simulation primarily employs task trainers designed to facilitate repetitive psychomotor skill acquisition. Common examples include intravenous cannulation models, lumbar puncture simulators, airway management trainers, urinary catheterization models, neonatal resuscitation mannequins, and surgical suturing devices. Although these simulators reproduce only limited anatomical realism, they provide effective opportunities for deliberate practice before learners perform procedures on actual patients. Multiple randomized studies have demonstrated superior procedural competence among learners receiving structured simulation compared with traditional observational teaching alone [2,18].

High-fidelity simulation utilizes sophisticated computerized mannequins capable of reproducing dynamic physiological responses including respiratory distress, cardiac arrhythmias, seizures, hemodynamic instability, pupillary responses, pharmacological reactions, and progressive clinical deterioration. These systems enable educators to recreate complex emergency scenarios requiring interns to integrate history taking, physical examination, interpretation of investigations, diagnostic reasoning, therapeutic prioritization, and multidisciplinary communication under realistic time pressure. High-fidelity simulation has become particularly valuable within emergency medicine, anesthesiology, pediatrics, obstetrics, trauma, and intensive care because these specialties frequently involve time-critical clinical decision-making [4,22].

Standardized patients represent another important simulation modality. Trained actors portray authentic clinical conditions while providing realistic histories, emotional responses, and communication challenges. Standardized patient encounters effectively develop competencies related to history taking, counseling, informed consent, shared decision-making, breaking bad news, professionalism, and patient-centered communication. They are also extensively incorporated into Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCEs), permitting standardized assessment of clinical reasoning and communication skills [23].

Hybrid simulation combines multiple educational modalities to increase realism. For example, a standardized patient may simultaneously wear a central venous catheter simulator, chest drainage trainer, or abdominal examination device requiring procedural intervention while maintaining realistic interpersonal communication. Such integrated approaches facilitate simultaneous assessment of technical skills, communication, professionalism, and clinical decision-making.

Technological advances have accelerated development of virtual patient simulation, serious gaming, virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and mixed reality (MR). Virtual patients allow interns to interact with computer-generated clinical cases requiring history taking, investigation selection, diagnostic reasoning, and treatment planning. These platforms provide unlimited opportunities for deliberate practice while generating detailed performance analytics. Similarly, immersive VR environments enable learners to manage trauma resuscitations, cardiac arrests, pediatric emergencies, disaster scenarios, and intensive care crises within highly realistic digital environments. Although implementation costs remain relatively high, accumulating evidence suggests that immersive technologies enhance learner engagement, confidence, and clinical reasoning while improving accessibility through remote simulation platforms.

Finally, in situ simulation has gained considerable attention because it occurs directly within authentic clinical environments using real healthcare teams and existing institutional equipment. Unlike simulation center training, in situ simulation evaluates both individual competence and organizational systems performance. Numerous institutions have successfully employed in situ simulation to identify latent safety threats, optimize emergency response systems, improve multidisciplinary communication, and enhance patient safety outcomes. This systems-based perspective reflects the expanding role of simulation beyond individual education toward comprehensive healthcare quality improvement [13,24].

5. IMPACT OF SIMULATION-BASED TRAINING ON CLINICAL DECISION-MAKING SKILLS AMONG MEDICAL INTERNS

Clinical decision-making (CDM) is a multidimensional cognitive process requiring physicians to collect clinical information, generate diagnostic hypotheses, interpret investigations, prioritize competing problems, initiate management, and continuously reassess patients as new information becomes available. For medical interns, this process is particularly challenging because they are transitioning from supervised learning to independent clinical practice while simultaneously developing professional confidence and adapting to complex healthcare systems. Consequently, improving clinical decision-making has become one of the principal objectives of internship training, and simulation-based education has emerged as one of the most effective educational strategies for achieving this objective [25–28].

Unlike traditional teaching methods that frequently emphasize knowledge acquisition, simulation requires learners to actively apply knowledge within realistic clinical environments characterized by uncertainty, incomplete information, evolving patient conditions, and time pressure. During simulation scenarios, interns repeatedly perform the same cognitive tasks expected during real patient encounters: recognizing abnormal findings, developing differential diagnoses, selecting appropriate investigations, initiating treatment, anticipating deterioration, communicating with multidisciplinary teams, and modifying management according to patient responses. This active cognitive engagement promotes the integration of theoretical knowledge with clinical reasoning and supports development of robust illness scripts that facilitate future diagnostic performance [2,4,25].

Multiple systematic reviews have consistently demonstrated that simulation-based education produces superior educational outcomes compared with traditional lecture-based instruction across multiple domains, including knowledge retention, technical competence, communication, teamwork, self-confidence, and clinical reasoning [4,9,26]. Although many earlier studies focused primarily on procedural competence, more recent investigations have increasingly examined higher-order cognitive outcomes such as diagnostic accuracy, prioritization, metacognition, and clinical judgment. Collectively, these findings suggest that simulation improves not only "how" physicians perform clinical procedures but also "how" they think during patient care.

5.1 Improvement in Diagnostic Reasoning

Diagnostic reasoning represents one of the most sophisticated components of clinical decision-making. It involves transforming patient information into meaningful diagnostic hypotheses while continuously updating those hypotheses as additional evidence becomes available. Novice physicians frequently experience difficulty with this process because they possess relatively limited clinical experience and underdeveloped illness scripts, making them more susceptible to cognitive biases such as premature closure, anchoring bias, and confirmation bias [21,29].

Simulation provides repeated exposure to authentic patient presentations that accelerate development of diagnostic reasoning. During realistic clinical scenarios, interns must synthesize patient history, physical examination findings, laboratory results, and imaging studies to formulate differential diagnoses while simultaneously excluding life-threatening conditions. Unlike bedside teaching, simulation allows identical clinical presentations to be repeated until diagnostic competence is achieved, thereby facilitating deliberate practice and progressive refinement of reasoning strategies [2,17].

Recent educational research has demonstrated significant improvements in diagnostic reasoning following structured simulation interventions. Computer-based case simulation, virtual patient platforms, and high-fidelity scenarios consistently improve interns' ability to recognize critical illness, prioritize differential diagnoses, and select appropriate diagnostic investigations. A recent quasi-experimental study involving medical interns demonstrated that computer case-based reasoning simulation significantly improved diagnostic accuracy and evidence-based antibiotic prescribing compared with conventional lectures, illustrating the superiority of active clinical reasoning over passive information delivery.

Similarly, screen-based simulation interventions have been shown to improve metacognitive awareness, diagnostic reasoning factors, and clinical knowledge through repeated exposure to progressively challenging patient cases. These findings support the concept that simulation enhances diagnostic reasoning by strengthening both analytical thinking and intuitive pattern recognition.

5.2 Development of Clinical Judgment

Although diagnostic reasoning and clinical judgment are closely related, clinical judgment extends beyond diagnosis to encompass interpretation of clinical priorities, anticipation of patient deterioration, treatment selection, and evaluation of management outcomes. Tanner's model describes clinical judgment as an iterative process involving noticing, interpreting, responding, and reflecting. Simulation naturally incorporates each of these cognitive stages, making it particularly effective for cultivating mature clinical judgment [30].

High-fidelity simulation requires interns to recognize subtle physiological deterioration, determine which abnormalities require immediate intervention, and modify treatment according to evolving patient responses. These experiences mirror authentic emergency department and intensive care unit practice, where decisions frequently must be made despite incomplete information. Consequently, learners develop greater situational awareness and prioritization skills while simultaneously improving confidence in independent decision-making.

Evidence consistently demonstrates that simulation-based educational interventions improve learners' clinical judgment compared with conventional educational approaches. Although much of the strongest evidence originates from nursing education, the underlying cognitive mechanisms are directly applicable to physician training because clinical judgment relies upon similar reasoning processes across healthcare professions. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis concluded that simulation-based education significantly improves clinical decision-making abilities among undergraduate healthcare learners, particularly when high-fidelity simulation and structured debriefing are incorporated.

5.3 Recognition and Management of Clinical Deterioration

One of the greatest challenges encountered by newly graduated physicians involves early recognition of deteriorating patients. Clinical deterioration often develops gradually through subtle physiological abnormalities before progressing to life-threatening instability. Failure to recognize these warning signs contributes substantially to preventable adverse events, delayed intensive care admission, and avoidable mortality.

Simulation uniquely addresses this educational need by allowing educators to reproduce progressive physiological deterioration in controlled environments. Interns repeatedly encounter critically ill patients with evolving respiratory failure, septic shock, cardiac arrest, anaphylaxis, diabetic ketoacidosis, status epilepticus, major trauma, neonatal emergencies, and pediatric resuscitation scenarios. Unlike real clinical practice, where exposure to such cases is unpredictable, simulation guarantees standardized experience with high-risk, low-frequency conditions.

Repeated exposure improves recognition of abnormal physiological trends, interpretation of early warning signs, prioritization of interventions, and anticipation of complications. Several emergency medicine simulation studies have demonstrated shorter time to diagnosis, earlier initiation of appropriate therapy, and improved adherence to evidence-based resuscitation guidelines following structured simulation curricula [4,31]. These improvements directly enhance clinical decision-making by enabling interns to recognize critical illness before irreversible deterioration occurs.

5.4 Improvement in Prioritization Under Time Pressure

Clinical environments rarely permit unlimited time for reflection. Emergency physicians, intensivists, pediatricians, and surgeons frequently make high-stakes decisions within minutes while managing multiple competing clinical priorities. Novice physicians often struggle with prioritization because limited experience increases cognitive workload and uncertainty.

Simulation reproduces these conditions while maintaining patient safety. Learners must rapidly distinguish immediately life-threatening problems from less urgent issues, allocate limited resources appropriately, coordinate multidisciplinary teams, and continuously revise management priorities as scenarios evolve. Through repeated exposure, interns gradually develop cognitive schemas that permit faster information processing and more efficient prioritization.

Educational psychologists describe this phenomenon as development of adaptive expertise, whereby repeated deliberate practice transforms effortful analytical reasoning into increasingly efficient pattern recognition without sacrificing diagnostic accuracy [17,19]. Consequently, simulation reduces cognitive overload while improving the speed and quality of clinical decision-making.

5.5 Reduction of Cognitive Errors

Diagnostic error remains one of the leading causes of preventable patient harm worldwide. Many diagnostic errors result not from inadequate knowledge but from predictable cognitive biases that distort clinical reasoning. Common biases include anchoring, availability bias, premature closure, framing effects, overconfidence, and confirmation bias [29].

Simulation provides a unique opportunity to deliberately expose learners to these cognitive traps. Carefully designed scenarios may intentionally encourage incorrect diagnostic assumptions before introducing additional information requiring learners to reconsider their reasoning. During structured debriefing, facilitators guide participants to identify how cognitive biases influenced their decisions and discuss strategies for preventing similar errors during future clinical encounters.

This reflective approach promotes metacognition—the ability to monitor and regulate one's own thinking—which represents an essential characteristic of expert clinicians. Emerging evidence suggests that simulation combined with reflective debriefing significantly improves diagnostic flexibility and reduces susceptibility to cognitive error, although additional longitudinal research remains necessary.

6. MECHANISMS THROUGH WHICH SIMULATION IMPROVES CLINICAL DECISION-MAKING

The educational effectiveness of simulation cannot be attributed solely to repeated exposure to clinical scenarios. Rather, multiple complementary mechanisms interact to facilitate development of sophisticated clinical reasoning.

Deliberate Practice

Perhaps the single most important mechanism underlying simulation-based education is deliberate practice. Ericsson demonstrated that expertise develops through focused repetition directed toward specific learning objectives rather than through clinical experience alone [17]. Simulation allows interns to repeatedly manage identical clinical situations until competence is achieved, receive immediate expert feedback, and progressively increase scenario complexity.

Unlike clinical rotations, where patient encounters cannot be standardized, simulation provides unlimited opportunities for targeted practice. This repetitive refinement strengthens diagnostic reasoning while promoting long-term retention of clinical knowledge.

Structured Debriefing

Debriefing has consistently been identified as the most educationally valuable component of simulation-based learning [32]. Learning occurs not simply because learners participate in simulation but because they subsequently analyze their cognitive processes, communication strategies, technical performance, and decision-making during facilitated reflection.

Contemporary debriefing models—including Debriefing with Good Judgment, PEARLS, and advocacy-inquiry—encourage learners to explain the reasoning underlying their decisions rather than merely identifying correct or incorrect actions. This reflective dialogue promotes metacognition, strengthens clinical reasoning, and facilitates transfer of learning into future clinical practice.

Recent systematic reviews conclude that while debriefing is universally regarded as essential, additional comparative research is still needed to determine which debriefing approaches consistently produce superior educational outcomes.

Feedback and Reflective Learning

Simulation provides immediate formative feedback that is rarely achievable during busy clinical practice. Faculty members can pause scenarios, review management decisions, discuss alternative approaches, and reinforce evidence-based clinical reasoning without compromising patient safety.

Recent educational studies have further demonstrated that collaborative reflection during debriefing significantly enhances problem-solving, clinical decision-making, reflective thinking, and learner satisfaction compared with traditional instructor-centered feedback models.

Another critical mechanism involves psychological safety. Interns frequently hesitate to make independent decisions in clinical environments because of fear of harming patients or receiving negative evaluations. Simulation creates educational environments in which errors are expected components of learning rather than professional failures.

Psychological safety encourages learners to verbalize uncertainty, test alternative hypotheses, acknowledge mistakes, and actively participate in reflective discussion. This openness facilitates deeper learning while reducing defensive behaviors that may otherwise impede development of clinical reasoning.

Transfer to Clinical Practice

The ultimate objective of simulation is transfer of learning into authentic patient care. Educational transfer occurs when knowledge and skills acquired in simulated environments are successfully applied during real clinical encounters.

Transfer is enhanced when simulation scenarios closely resemble actual clinical practice, incorporate multidisciplinary teamwork, employ authentic equipment, and require integration of technical and cognitive skills. Evidence increasingly suggests that repeated simulation exposure improves clinical performance beyond the simulation laboratory, although measuring direct patient outcome improvements remains methodologically challenging. Recent intern-focused studies using virtual patient platforms grounded in deliberate practice and Kolb's experiential learning theory have demonstrated significant improvements in clinical reasoning and performance compared with conventional training.

7. CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS OF SIMULATION-BASED TRAINING

Despite its well-established educational benefits, simulation-based training (SBT) has several limitations that should be considered when designing internship curricula. One of the primary challenges is the high cost associated with establishing and maintaining simulation centers. High-fidelity mannequins, virtual reality platforms, dedicated facilities, and faculty training require substantial financial investment, limiting implementation in resource-constrained institutions [33,34].

Another limitation is the variability in simulation fidelity and instructional quality. Educational outcomes depend more on scenario design, facilitator expertise, and structured debriefing than on simulator technology alone. Poorly designed scenarios or inadequate debriefing may significantly reduce learning effectiveness despite sophisticated equipment [32,35].

Evidence regarding long-term retention and transfer of learning to real clinical practice also remains limited. While numerous studies demonstrate immediate improvements in knowledge, confidence, and clinical decision-making, relatively few have evaluated whether these gains persist months after training or directly improve patient outcomes [4,26,36].

Assessment methods represent another important challenge. Studies employ diverse outcome measures—including OSCE scores, simulation performance checklists, self-confidence questionnaires, and clinical reasoning tests—making comparisons across studies difficult. The absence of standardized assessment tools limits the ability to draw definitive conclusions regarding the magnitude of educational benefit [27,37].

Finally, most published studies involve single-center institutions with relatively small sample sizes, reducing the generalizability of findings. Future multicenter randomized controlled trials using standardized outcome measures are needed to strengthen the evidence base [35,38].

8. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future simulation programs should move beyond isolated educational workshops toward longitudinal, curriculum-integrated models that accompany learners throughout undergraduate education and internship. Regular exposure to progressively complex scenarios may enhance long-term clinical reasoning, confidence, and adaptive expertise [10,26].

Technological advances, particularly artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and mixed reality (MR), are expected to transform simulation-based education. AI-driven virtual patients capable of adapting dynamically to learners' decisions may provide personalized learning experiences while generating objective performance analytics [39,40].

Another emerging priority is competency-based assessment. Future simulation programs should incorporate validated instruments that objectively evaluate diagnostic reasoning, prioritization, communication, leadership, and teamwork rather than relying solely on self-reported confidence [12,37].

Interprofessional simulation is also likely to expand. Since healthcare delivery increasingly depends on multidisciplinary collaboration, simulation involving physicians, nurses, pharmacists, and allied health professionals may better prepare interns for real clinical environments while improving communication and patient safety [14,41].

Finally, future research should emphasize patient-centered outcomes. Rather than focusing exclusively on educational performance, investigators should examine whether simulation training reduces diagnostic errors, improves adherence to clinical guidelines, shortens time to treatment, and ultimately enhances patient outcomes [36,42].

9. CONCLUSION

Simulation-based training has become an indispensable component of contemporary medical education, particularly during the transition from medical school to internship. Current evidence consistently demonstrates that simulation enhances clinical decision-making by improving diagnostic reasoning, clinical judgment, prioritization, recognition of patient deterioration, teamwork, communication, and reflective practice. These benefits are primarily achieved through experiential learning, deliberate practice, structured debriefing, and psychologically safe environments that allow repeated exposure to complex clinical scenarios without jeopardizing patient safety [2,15,17,32].

Although challenges remain—including cost, faculty development, variability in assessment methods, and limited long-term outcome data—the educational advantages of simulation substantially outweigh its limitations. Importantly, simulation should not replace bedside teaching but rather complement authentic clinical experience through structured, competency-based learning opportunities.

Future internship curricula should integrate simulation longitudinally, incorporate evidence-based debriefing, adopt standardized assessment strategies, and leverage emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and immersive virtual reality. Well-designed simulation programs have the potential not only to improve the competence and confidence of medical interns but also to enhance patient safety and healthcare quality by producing clinicians with stronger clinical reasoning and more effective decision-making skills.

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