Spanish/Nursing Course Bridges Barriers

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If you or a loved one have ever needed emergency medical care, you know the feeling of disorientation and confusion that typically accompanies an unscheduled trip to the emergency room or medical clinic.

Imagine complicating that experience with a language barrier.

Knowing this situation is a reality for many in Sioux Center and beyond, Dordt offers a Spanish language course for nursing students and those studying to enter other medical fields.

Designed to be practical and fit into the already packed schedule of the busy nursing student, Spanish for Health Professionals is a one-credit conversation course built on role-playing situations. Developed by Nursing Professor Amy Van Beek and Language Studies Professor Rikki Heldt, the course includes both medical vocabulary and vocabulary that helps patients interpret insurance and legal forms and communicate vital information before a certified hospital interpreter arrives.

Instructors often use recorded conversations to help them teach, says Heldt. Some of the situations are so unusual they cause students to laugh. One such scenario, however, involving a patient who came in bleeding because he’d tried to cut off a wart, proved closer to reality than students expected. The next day, says Heldt, a student came in having observed the same scenario in the clinic.

Nursing students put their learning into practice by working alongside medical professionals at Promise Community Health Center, a Sioux Center medical clinic that serves much of the city’s growing Latino population. By working with Promise, students can fulfill two program requirements at once and get real-world skill practice—an opportunity they appreciate.

One student wrote about her experience shadowing an interpreter at the Promise Community Health Center: “I was surprised at how much Spanish I have picked up in such a short time. I was able to follow most of the conversation and understand what the patients needed and what assessment questions the CNA and translator were asking the patients. It was an awesome experience to interact with Spanish-speaking people in a medical setting and be able to understand what was going on.”

Senior Stephanie Haan was one of two Dordt nursing students selected to travel to Guatemala for 10 days to assist local nurses and gain clinical experience in a cross-cultural context.