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# The Effectiveness of a Geriatric Simulation Suit for Improving Empathy and Simulating the Aging Process for Older Adults in a DPT Program

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**INTRODUCTION:** The older adult population in the United States is projected to increase to more than 83 million in the next 25 years. Students in the healthcare field might lack firsthand experience related to aging-related issues thus reducing their ability to empathize effectively with older adults.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this study is to determine the effectiveness of using a homemade geriatric simulation suit on empathy levels towards the older adult population in physical therapy students.

**METHODS:** Thirty-eight physical therapy students were fitted with a homemade geriatric simulation suit that provided simulated movement, balance, and vision changes that the older adult may experience. The Jefferson Scale of Empathy for Health Professions student version was utilized to measure empathy-related parameters before and after the geriatric simulation experience. Physical and cognitive performance tests were also used to assess the effectiveness of the geriatric suit to simulate the aging process. Additionally, sociodemographic data were collected such as age, gender and prior experience working with older adults.

**RESULTS:** The results of this study indicate that participant empathy increased after wearing the geriatric suit and participating in the geriatric simulation experience. The difference between pre and post empathy mean scores were statistically significant ( $t=2.09$ ,  $p=0.022$ ), but did have a small effect size (.34).

**CONCLUSION:** Using a homemade geriatric simulation suit may be an appropriate and cost-effective way to improve empathy in physical therapy students. The geriatric suit also closely mimics normative data for community dwelling older adults over 65 years of age.