

Empathy is a strong suit

Aging simulation offers Sienna's senior executive a personal perspective

By Drew Tapley

His jumpsuit is tightened by straps that bend him over to restrict his movements. Weights are applied to his arms and legs to burden motion. During this whole process, his only remarks are to confirm if something is too tight or uncomfortable; which of course it is. It's designed to be.

Brian Richardson is wearing an aging simulation suit at Baycrest Health Sciences in Toronto — a global leader in geriatric research with a focus on brain health. He is the Chief Marketing Officer at Sienna Senior Living, and was invited to try on the suit and participate in a senior role-play experience, observed by his team.

Baycrest's manager of training and simulation, Lisa Sokoloff, yanks the straps down. Before she clips them into place, she checks that he is okay. The more straps and weights she adds, the more assurances she needs. Once the neck brace goes on, thick yellow-lens goggles are placed over almost half his face, followed by ear plugs and gloves.

It's all designed to demonstrate an intimate insight into the everyday experience of a senior with advanced years, reduced range of motion, rapidly failing eyesight and hearing loss, and dementia-related confusion.

Someone asks if he's hot inside the suit. "It's not hot as much as very awkward and restraining," says Brian, visibly flustered.

Lisa makes an announcement to Brian's colleagues, who are gathered around him. "Once we start the simulation, please don't engage with him. We want him fully immersed in the experience."

She explains what is about to happen, how long it will last, and whether anyone has any questions. Then she



exits the room as Brian sits on a chair adjusting the goggles to find a more comfortable fit. He soon discovers there isn't one.

Lisa re-enters in the role of a healthcare worker overseeing a medical appointment in a busy clinic or hospital.

"Brian? Come with me. Let's go!" she says, her tone abrupt and cold. "We're really backed up today so I need you to hurry it along, please."

He stands with the use of a cane and is led into the corridor, where he ambles along slowly, his confidence eroding with each step.

"Can you go any faster, please?" asks Lisa the healthcare aide.

"I can't!" responds Brian with brittle honesty.

After walking down a corridor and into another room, he's told there is a table with some forms. The lights are off. He proclaims that he can't see. They are turned on. It's clearly an afterthought.

He's asked, or rather told to read and sign medical consent forms so they can move on with the procedure. "I'll be back in a second," she announces, and he's left alone with the forms to

read and sign before her prompt return and a matronly scolding for not having signed them yet.

"Brian, what's the holdup here?" she asks, clearly annoyed.

The pen that's been left for him is actually a drinking straw, quickly swapped for a pen. By way of an explanation as to why he's being rushed around, he's told that they are behind today because somebody phoned in sick.

"You know what that's like," she says. It's more of a statement than a question, and another order is issued on its heels for him to vacate the room and

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NEWS

Opposite page: Brian Richardson of Sienna Senior Living is assisted into the aging simulation suit by Lisa Sokoloff, Manager of Simulation and training at Baycrest Health Sciences.

Right: The simulation suit is designed to demonstrate an intimate insight into the everyday experience of a senior with advanced years.

head next door for the procedure. The simulation is exaggerated, of course, to drive home a clear message.

In another room with boxes everywhere and limited floor space, Brian is directed to a gown that he's expected to put on himself, much to his dismay.

"So, I am literally supposed to put this on?" he asks while lifting a folded gown off a bedside cabinet.

"Yes, please. It ties in the back," she states before walking off.

Eventually, she heads back over and helps him with the gown before instructing him to "Just hop up on the bed." He replies with thinly-veiled frustration, "I don't know about hop!"

And then the experience is over after just seven minutes. Brian wastes no time in removing the goggles, weights and suit.

"It was really awkward," he says with palpable relief. "The goggles are disorienting with a huge reduction in range and depth of vision. I felt anxious, confused and frustrated, both at the health-care worker and myself for my loss of control. It was all very unnerving."

Brian admits that he would never normally sign something without reading it.

"I relented. I just did," he says. "And that's atypical of me. I would normally have said something about the way I was being treated, but I felt vulnerable and was much more tolerant than I otherwise would have been. I feel like I'm not that far away from all of this, so it's particularly hard hitting for me."

"When I next go into one of our residences, I will have a different perspective. And this was only a few minutes. I've done deep sea diving with weights and never felt that combination of sensations before. This experience will definitely help me rethink the way we approach marketing and communications for our residents." **LC**

