Effect of an Immersive Preoperative Virtual Reality Experience on Patient Reported Outcomes

A Randomized Controlled Trial

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**Objective:** To investigate the effect of exposure to a virtual reality (VR) environment preoperatively on patient-reported outcomes for surgical operations.

**Background:** There is a scarcity of well-developed quality improvement initiatives targeting patient satisfaction.

**Methods:** We performed a randomized controlled trial of patients undergoing cranial and spinal operations in a tertiary referral center. Patients underwent a 1:1 randomization to an immersive preoperative VR experience or standard preoperative experience stratified on type of operation. The primary outcome measure in the present text was provided in the Evaluation du Vecu de I’Anesthesie Generale (EVAN-G) score and the Amsterdam Preoperative Anxiety and Information (APAIS) score, as markers of the patient’s experience during the surgical encounter.

**Results:** During the study period, a total of 127 patients (mean age 55.3 years, 41.9% females) underwent randomization. The average EVAN-G score was 84.3 (standard deviation, SD, 6.4) after VR, and 64.3 (SD, 11.7) after standard preoperative experience (difference, 20.0; 95% confidence interval, CI, 16.6–23.3). Exposure to an immersive VR experience also led to higher APAIS score (difference, 29.9; 95% CI, 24.5–35.2). In addition, VR led to lower preoperative VAS stress score (difference, −41.7; 95% CI, −33.1 to −50.2), and higher preoperative VAS preparedness (difference, 32.4; 95% CI, 24.9–39.8), and VAS satisfaction (difference, 33.2; 95% CI, 25.4–41.0) scores. No association was identified with VAS stress score (difference, −1.6; 95% CI, −13.4 to 10.2).

**Conclusions:** In a randomized controlled trial, we demonstrated that patients exposed to preoperative VR had increased satisfaction during the surgical encounter. Harnessing the power of this technology, hospitals can create an immersive environment that minimizes stress, and enhances the perioperative experience.

**Keywords:** patient satisfaction, patient-reported outcomes, randomized clinical trial, surgery, virtual reality

**Annals of Surgery** 2017;265:1068–1073

As the practice of medicine is shifting from authority to accountability, the quality of surgical interventions is under continuous scrutiny by patients, peers, payers, and policy makers. In this setting, there is increasing focus on patient satisfaction as a quality indicator. An important part of surgical outcomes is the patients’ perception of the result of the intervention and their overall experience. Anxiety, a potent behavioral and psychological reaction, weighs heavily on this experience and is exacerbated by unfamiliar environments, multiple forms to be signed, and several short encounters with new personnel. These create confusion, increase baseline stress, and can negatively affect the patient experience, and by extension surgical outcomes. A qualitative systematic review noted a scarcity of well-development quality improvement initiatives targeting patient satisfaction.

Prior trials examining the effectiveness of such initiatives have focused on pharmacologic interventions, or preoperative education aimed at minimizing anxiety. However, these approaches have demonstrated varied patient engagement and conflicting results. On the contrary, a more immersive intervention geared towards increasing familiarity with this environment can help patients feel informed about what matters most to them, and have accurate expectations of possible benefits and harms of their option. This can potentially decrease overall anxiety, and improve patient satisfaction. Virtual reality (VR) addresses a lot of these issues, and can potentially decrease overall anxiety, and improve patient satisfaction.

To assess the efficacy of VR on improving patient satisfaction, we conducted a randomized clinical trial among patients undergoing cranial and spinal operations. We compared perioperative self-reported outcomes, among patients exposed with a preoperative immersive VR experience, and those undergoing a standard preoperative experience.

**METHODS**

**Trial Design**

This study was a single center randomized parallel controlled trial that was conducted in a tertiary referral center, where cranial and spinal procedures were routinely performed. The study was approved by the Dartmouth Committee for Protection of Human Subjects.

Funding was provided in part by the National Institutes of Health. The first author wrote the first draft of the manuscript, and all the authors made the decision to submit the manuscript for publication. The funders had no role in the study design, execution, data analysis, authorship, or submission of the manuscript.

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EV AN-G was obtained immediately postoperatively within 24 hours of the procedure. Visual analog scales (range 0 (worst) to 100 (best)] measuring patient pain and satisfaction, which were obtained preoperatively on the day of the surgery and postoperatively within 24 hours of the procedure. Visual analog scales (range 0 (worst) to 100 (best)] measuring patient preparedness, and stress were obtained preoperatively on the day of the surgery. Visual analog scales (range 0 (worst) to 100 (best)] measuring patient pain 30-days postoperatively were only obtained for spine patients. (Supplementary Methods, http://links.lww.com/SLA/B150).

**Statistical Analysis**

Given a 1:1 randomization a sample size of 134 would yield an 80% power at the usual 5% type 1 error rate to detect a difference between the two arms of one half (0.5) standard deviations in the primary outcome. We anticipated not being able to obtain the primary outcome on up to 10% of patients, and therefore the intended study population was 150 patients.

Baseline characteristics in each arm were reported as frequencies and percentages for categorical variables, and as means and standard deviations or medians and interquartile ranges for continuous variables, as appropriate. Categorical variables were compared with the use of the $\chi^2$ test and continuous variables were compared with the use of Student $t$ test, as appropriate.

Our primary analyses were modeled using our primary and secondary outcomes as dependent variables and the exposure variable of interest (VR) as an independent variable, stratified on the type of operation.

In prespecified sensitivity analyses, we employed a multivariable linear regression model, with treating physician used as a random effects variable to control for clustering at the provider level. All regressions were controlled for age, gender, type of operation (craniotherapy, spine surgery) insurance coverage (Medicare, Medicaid, private, self-pay, other), and the following comorbidities present on admission: hypertension, myocardial infarction, cardiac arrhythmia, congestive heart failure, hyperlipidemia, coagulopathy, ischemic stroke, peripheral vascular disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, other pulmonary disease, diabetes, alcohol abuse, malignancy, and psychiatric history. In posthoc sensitivity analyses, we repeated the analysis of our primary outcomes separately for cranial and spinal operations. The direction of the observed associations did not change and therefore these results are not presented any further.

The primary and secondary outcomes were obtained in all patients. All analyses were based on the intention-to-treat principle, and were performed at the two-sided alpha level of 0.05. STATA version 13 (StataCorp, College Station, TX), and the 64-bit version of R 2.12.2 (R Foundation for Statistical Computing) were used for statistical analysis.

**RESULTS**

**Patient Characteristics**

A total of 127 patients (mean age 55.3 years, 41.9% females) were randomized into this study from November 2015 to April 2016 (Fig. 1). Table 1 demonstrates the distribution of patient characteristics between patients exposed to a preoperative immersive VR experience, and those undergoing a standard preoperative experience.

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Primary Outcomes

**EVAN-G**

The average EVAN-G score was 84.3 (standard deviation, SD, 6.4) after an immersive VR experience, and 64.3 (SD, 11.7) after standard preoperative experience. Exposure to an immersive VR experience led to higher EVAN-G score (difference, 20.0; 95% confidence interval, CI, 16.6–23.3) in the unadjusted analysis.

Adjusting for confounders with a mixed effects multivariable linear regression model (Table 2) demonstrated a similar effect (adjusted difference, 20.5; 95% CI, 11.9–21.0).

### Table 1. Patient Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Virtual Reality</th>
<th>No Virtual Reality</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age, mean (SD)</td>
<td>55.3 (14.0)</td>
<td>57.3 (13.2)</td>
<td>53.4 (14.6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female sex</td>
<td>53 (41.9%)</td>
<td>28 (44.3%)</td>
<td>25 (39.7%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Insurance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medicaid</td>
<td>16 (12.9%)</td>
<td>7 (11.5%)</td>
<td>9 (14.2%)</td>
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<td>Medicare</td>
<td>47 (37.1%)</td>
<td>25 (39.3%)</td>
<td>22 (34.9%)</td>
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<td>Private</td>
<td>57 (45.2%)</td>
<td>28 (44.3%)</td>
<td>29 (46.0%)</td>
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<td>Uninsured</td>
<td>1 (0.8%)</td>
<td>1 (1.6%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<td>Cranial procedures</td>
<td>52 (41.1%)</td>
<td>29 (45.9%)</td>
<td>23 (36.5%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comorbidities</td>
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<td>Hypertension</td>
<td>58 (46.0%)</td>
<td>34 (52.6%)</td>
<td>24 (49.2%)</td>
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<td>Hyperlipidemia</td>
<td>37 (29.0%)</td>
<td>13 (20.6%)</td>
<td>24 (33.3%)</td>
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<td>Smoking</td>
<td>28 (21.8%)</td>
<td>14 (21.3%)</td>
<td>14 (22.2%)</td>
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<td>Renal insufficiency</td>
<td>4 (3.2%)</td>
<td>2 (2.6%)</td>
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<td>Coronary heart disease</td>
<td>13 (10.5%)</td>
<td>2 (2.6%)</td>
<td>11 (6.3%)</td>
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<td>Pulmonary disease</td>
<td>25 (19.4%)</td>
<td>8 (13.1%)</td>
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<td>Malignancy</td>
<td>36 (28.2%)</td>
<td>18 (27.9%)</td>
<td>18 (28.6%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Psychiatric disease</td>
<td>44 (34.7%)</td>
<td>11 (24.6%)</td>
<td>33 (44.4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SD indicates standard deviation.
Output represents crude numbers and percentages in parentheses.
Identified on admission for the surgical procedure.
Non-smoking related.

### Table 2. Correlation of Immersive Virtual Reality Preoperative Experience With Outcome Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Models</th>
<th>Primary Outcomes</th>
<th>EVAN-G</th>
<th>APAIS</th>
<th>Preoperative VAS Stress Score</th>
<th>Preoperative VAS Preparedness Score</th>
<th>Preoperative VAS Satisfaction Score</th>
<th>Postoperative VAS Pain Score</th>
<th>30-day Postoperative VAS Pain Score</th>
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</table>

APAIS indicates Amsterdam Preoperative Anxiety and Information; CI confidence interval; EVAN-G, Evaluation du Vecu de l’Anesthesie Generale; HR, hazards ratio; VAS, visual analog scale.

Mixed effects: Includes treating physician as a random effect variable.
Adjusted for age, sex, insurance, hypertension, hyperlipidemia, smoking, diabetes mellitus, coronary artery disease, kidney disease, lung disease, cancer, and psychiatric history.
Analyses based on linear regression.
The average APAIS score was 90.7 after an immersive VR experience and 60.8 after standard preoperative experience. Exposure to an immersive VR experience led to higher APAIS score (difference, 29.9; 95% CI, 24.5–35.2) in the unadjusted analysis. Adjusting for confounders with a mixed effects multivariable linear regression model (Table 2) demonstrated a similar effect (adjusted difference, 31.1; 95% CI, 22.2–39.9).

Secondary Outcomes

Immersion VR experience led to (Table 2) lower average preoperative VAS stress score (difference, –41.7; 95% CI, –33.1 to –50.2).

On the contrary VR experience led to (Table 2) higher preoperative VAS preparedness (difference, 32.4; 95% CI, 24.9–39.8), and VAS satisfaction scores (difference, 33.2; 95% CI, 25.4–41.0). The same was true for the postoperative VAS satisfaction score (difference, 26.4; 95% CI, 20.1–32.6).

Lastly, we did not identify an effect (Table 2) of exposure to an immersive VR experience on average preoperative VAS pain score (difference, –1.6; 95% CI, –13.4 to 10.2), postoperative VAS pain score (difference, –1.3; 95% CI, –4.2 to 6.8), or 30-day postoperative (for spinal surgery patients only) VAS pain score (difference, –1.3; 95% CI, –4.2 to 6.8).

DISCUSSION

In a randomized controlled trial, assessing a new application of VR on the perioperative setting, we demonstrated that patients exposed to a preoperative immersive VR experience had increased satisfaction for the surgical encounter. The VR group was more prepared, and had less stress during the perioperative period. Perioperative pain was not affected by VR exposure. These results were consistent across techniques to control for confounders.

In recent years, patient satisfaction has been at the center of healthcare reform. The creation of public reporting platforms, such as the Hospital Compare and Physician Compare websites by the Centers of Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), has put significant weight on patient experience. Most recently Medicare has released its 5-star ratings for hospitals and a new array of patient satisfaction metrics. Prior studies have demonstrated that better performance in these measures correlates with improved objective...
surgical outcomes, such as mortality and readmissions. Although, these initiatives started in 2007 as purely informative, they have assumed center stage in the efforts of CMS to bring quality to the forefront of care delivery. Hospital reimbursement is now tied to some degree to surveys filled out by patients after their discharge from these institutions. However, hundreds of hospitals still struggle to improve patient satisfaction, and there are a limited number of comprehensive initiatives targeting the patient experience.

Prior investigations have demonstrated conflicting results for efforts to improve perioperative patient satisfaction. Maurice-Szamburski et al., in a randomized trial of surgical patients in France, failed to demonstrate a benefit of sedative premedication on surgical patient satisfaction as measured by the EVAN-G score. Pharmacologic intervention does not address the root of the anxiety experienced by a lot of patients around the time of their surgery. Other initiatives have focused on minimizing waiting times, improving the physician-patient interactions, and creating new healthcare delivery systems. However, little effect has been seen in terms of measurable improvement in patient experience. Other groups have employed preoperative patient education as a means of improving satisfaction, albeit with conflicting results. The degree of patient engagement with this approach is varied, justifying the inconsistent efficacy observed.

Previous studies have demonstrated that surgical patients feel uncertain, vulnerable, and exposed. Although the extent to which they contribute to patient dissatisfaction remains uncertain, the use of virtual reality attempts to address these feelings. Preoperative use of VR in our study allowed patients to be immersed in the entire perioperative encounter from the safety of the physician’s office, without the stress of the impending operation. They can place themselves in the hospital space and experience various interactions with healthcare personnel, transitions of care, different spaces (including the operating room), and postoperative care. Patients can ask questions and move around in space, focusing on elements that are more important to them. We hypothesized that this individualized experience can facilitate patient participation in their care and minimize anxiety. Our study demonstrates that, harnessing the power of this technology, hospitals can create an immersive environment that improves patient satisfaction and enhances the perioperative experience.

These effects are in accordance with prior literature utilizing VR as a mechanism for exposure therapy in patients with psychiatric disorders. In several randomized trials, VR has demonstrated superior outcomes to standard behavioral therapies for a series of anxiety disorders. In fact, Garcia-Palacios et al have demonstrated that 80% of their patients preferred virtual exposure to in vivo exposure. The hypothesized mechanism behind the effectiveness of this approach lies with the processes of habituation and extinction. Patients are not mere observers; instead they are given control of complex, immersive, and dynamic 3-dimensional presentations in the virtual environment they are sensorially inserted. This approach diminishes the gap between imagination and the real world allowing the patients to align their expectations with reality. The sense of security it offers can permit the expression of thoughts and feelings that in real situations would be difficult to be materialized.

Our study has several limitations. First, although this is a randomized controlled trial, it was performed in a single tertiary referral center. The extrapolation of these results in general community settings should be done with caution. Second, patients and providers could not be blinded in regards to the group assignment. However, research personnel conducting interviews and analyzing the data were blinded to the study group allocation, limiting this bias.

### CONCLUSIONS
There is a scarcity of well-development quality improvement initiatives targeting patient satisfaction. We investigated the effect of exposure to a VR environment preoperatively on patient-reported outcomes for surgical operations. In a randomized controlled trial, we demonstrated that patients exposed to a preoperative immersive VR experience had increased satisfaction during the surgical encounter. The VR group was more prepared, and had less stress in the perioperative period. Perioperative pain was not affected by VR exposure. Harnessing the power of this technology, hospitals can create an immersive environment that minimizes stress, and enhances the perioperative experience (Fig. 2).

### REFERENCES


