

To Treat with Skill and Soul

PATIENT PARTNERS WORKSHOP

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April 4, 2025. Room 308 of the San Martin de Porres Building slowly filled with third-year medical students, post-graduate interns, residents, fellows, and faculty. On the surface, it was another structured academic activity. But beneath the rotation schedules and PowerPoint slides, something deeper was unfolding.

The *Patient Partners Workshop* has always been more than a teaching session. Its true power lies in the space it creates, a space where clinical learning intersects with lived experience, where physical exam skills meet the human stories behind them.



The day began with a short but meaningful orientation from Prof. Sandra V. Navarra, whose words reminded everyone why we were gathered: to learn about connective tissue diseases and understand them from the people who carry them every day.

Two large student groups were formed and guided through rotating breakout sessions, where each station was shaped by the presence



of patient partners who offered their time, their insights, and the physical realities of living with disease to enrich our teaching. There was Zeny, Elyn, Herminia, Sonia, Eloisa, Daisy, Faye, Melany, and Myrna, each one with a unique journey through rheumatoid arthritis or psoriatic arthritis. And, of course, our youngest participant, Caster, living with systemic juvenile idiopathic arthritis, brought a whole new level to the conversations.

What made this workshop truly special was how students were encouraged to go beyond surface-level findings. They learned to observe

deformities and assess range of motion, yes, but also to ask, *What is it like to wake up with this pain every day? How does this disease change the way you live, work, connect, and hope?*

The breakout rooms were co-facilitated by a group of clinician-educators. Dr. Christine Bernal brought her pediatric expertise to guide students through Caster's case. IM-Rheumatologists Dr. Lyndon Llamado, Dr. Julie Li-Yu, Dr. Millicent Tan-Ong, and Dr. Leonid Zamora offered pearls drawn from years of clinical experience. Dr. Inocencio Alejandro, our IM - Geria and Rheumatologist, gently highlighted the importance of holistic care, especially in aging populations with chronic disease.



Alongside them were fellows, residents, and postgraduate interns, each one helping to bridge theory and reality. The students weren't just observing disease, they were witnessing resilience, listening to unspoken struggles, and being challenged to shift how they think about care.

The morning ended with group presentations and reflections. Some shared key clinical takeaways, while others reflected more deeply. One group rewrote the lyrics of a familiar song to express their gratitude and learning. Another described the experience as *humbling*—not because they were unprepared, but because of how much they didn't know about the quiet strength it takes to live with an invisible illness.



And maybe that's what the workshop was truly about.

To remind all of us—consultants, doctors-in-training, and students, that patients are not defined by their symptoms. That chronic illness isn't always visible, but its weight is real. That beyond the swollen joints and imaging findings are stories of persistence, identity, and grace.

Workshops like this don't just teach technique. They shape clinicians. They make future doctors pause, reflect, and hopefully choose—again and again—to treat with both skill and soul.

