In a space that looks every bit like a labor and delivery room, a mother gives birth, and a nursing student places the crying newborn in a high-tech incubator. But just two minutes later, the mom begins to hemorrhage, and the baby turns blue. The student has to respond.

In another room, a boy lies in a hospital bed strewn with GI Joes and comic books. "How are you?" the student asks. "I'm tired," the boy responds. The student asks another question, but the boy does not respond. He has gone into cardiac arrest, possibly from a drug overdose.

These intense, real-life situations play out every day at the new $4 million Wheaton Franciscan Healthcare Center for Clinical Simulation, located at Marquette University's College of Nursing. But the patients are played by high-tech, computer-programmed mannequins that lie in hospital beds and have conversations with attending nurses and students through wireless mics connected to instructors in a control room. These "patients" regularly go into cardiac arrest, hemorrhage, or have allergic reactions, code out.

Down the hall, another simulated patient, programmed to have skyrocketing blood pressure and a weakening pulse, lies in bed. When a student approaches with a syringe, the mannequin scans its bar code — for the medicine and the dose — and responds with the appropriate medical indicators.

After each scenario concludes, several students and a professor meet in a debriefing room and, not unlike a football team, review the tape, play by play. It's easy to see how such training leaves the written medical scenario in the dust. "It's one of the most advanced centers in the nation," say Brenda Bowers, senior vice president of organizational change and leadership performance at Wheaton Franciscan Healthcare. "The demands on everyone in health care are higher, and we all have to think differently."

The center opened in August and was financed by Wheaton Franciscan, GE Healthcare (which donated $440,000 for patient monitors and technological equipment) and a fundraising campaign by Marquette's College of Nursing. It's used by Marquette to train students and by Wheaton Franciscan for continuing education of its nursing workforce. But one of its most fantastic uses will be to replay the real and rare in-hospital occurrences that involve entire medical teams, including doctors, respiratory therapists, labs, blood banks, and emergency technicians, says Bowers.

The notion of high-fidelity simulations is rooted in the airline industry, where pilots perfect routine skills and practice for rare occurrences, such as landing a plane on a river, according to Margaret Callahan, dean of Marquette's College of Nursing. "The center lets us re-create rare events in a way that is controlled and risk-free," she says. "The goal is to dispel belief."