Background: The interest and demand for distance nursing education have increased lately. There is therefore a need to explore instructional approaches that better fitted a distance based curriculum. Simple patient cases have been used but the use of virtual patients remains to be studied. The purpose of this study was to investigate the acceptance and value of virtual patients (VPs), in a distance nursing education setting, as a mean to support the students in improving their clinical reasoning.

Method: Four VPs were created by the course director and then introduced, as a mandatory requirement, in a distance course in emergency medicine (5 weeks). The students (n=25) filled in a questionnaire at the end of the course with regard to the authenticity of the patient encounter, their professional approach while interacting with the VPs and their perceived value of such type of learning activity.

Result: The students (77%) reported that they adopted a professional approach by actively engaging in gathering information and revising their working hypothesis during the process of interacting with the VPs. The majority of the students (80%) also felt that the encounters mimicked a real life situation. A recurring comment from the students was the importance of an adequate feedback to foster a deeper reflection.

Conclusions: VPs could help nursing students improve their clinical reasoning in a distance education setting. Creating VPs with adequate feedback might foster a deeper reflection. The quality of the feedback is probably more important than on campus courses where the teacher can provide alternative forms of support.

Keywords: virtual patient, nursing education, distance education