

CHALLENGES IN RESEARCH INTO PATIENT SAFETY

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The Cogitare Enfermagem Journal selected Patient Safety as the central theme of its special edition commemorating 20 years of publication. This publication is aggregated to epidemiological studies on unwanted occurrences during healthcare provision, which have been emphasized in recent years. Faced with the harsh reality observed in the routine of care provision, different, opposing perspectives shape the public and institutional policies, which contribute to deepening knowledge on the scale of the problem and to structuring strategies for preventing and controlling these threats to health.

One cannot deny the relevance of the initiatives of the World Health Organization and of Agencies regulating the quality and safety of care, and their impact in establishing standards of excellence. Part of the actions now established in public policies has been recognized for decades as evidence for the prevention of health problems; for example, elementary care measures for the prevention – among others – of pressure ulcers, falls, medication errors and healthcare-associated infections. One must ask, however, why it is that nursing professionals' adherence to concepts which are basic and recognized as irrefutable – such as changing the patient's position, keeping the bedsides up, checking prescribed, prepared and administered drugs with a colleague, and hand hygiene – is so low. Observational studies partly reveal the truth, and I dare to say that what is presented so much shows only part of the care context: the reality is far worse. The need to deepen and broaden investigations in order the better to understand the determinants of poor adherence to actions which are basic – but fundamental to patient safety – is irrefutable.

Faced with the scale of the variety and complexity which make up the relationship of care, I reflect on potential research subjects which I consider fundamental for Nursing in this confrontation: scientific knowledge, the care context, and human behavior.

University training and the nursing workforce constitute evidence demonstrated, by academics, to support patient safety in a number of developed countries. In Brazil, the Nursing Profile study recently revealed that only 20% of the workforce is made up of nurses, and that 66% of the participants indicate professional burnout. The importance of these aspects in providing safe care is undeniable: professional training and qualification, and the nurse-patient relationship, must be considered in the scope of the public and institutional policies when the objective is safety. As a result, it is important to demonstrate – in the Brazilian context too – evidence which supports the struggle for changes which contribute to the quality of care and support new legal provisions for the profession.

Associated with the aggravating factors of poor qualification and high nurse-patient ratio is human behavior; to this, one can add the value attributed by the professional to the patient and to the basic safety actions. It may be that it is not always overload or lack of knowledge which trigger health incidents – but rather, neglect and the feeling of impunity for unsafe care practiced knowingly?. Acts which are unsafe and which result in errors of omission – that is to say, not doing what is correct – constitute another major challenge to patient safety, as they frequently make up, in an almost natural way, the practice in healthcare.

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Results from research can guide the strategies – which are certainly diverse – in order to achieve and maintain the desired quality of care, this linked to safety and personified in care which is planned and undertaken by a workforce which is sufficient in numbers and qualified. A workforce, moreover, whose normal attitude holds the patient as the center of attention, a fundamental element, and the principal meaning of undertaking Nursing.

As a result, I consider that the researchers on the issue have available to them ample material for investigating; ideally in a way which is multicentric and which adds scientific evidence which is fundamental to the necessary improvement of the care practice of nursing.