

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

ATTITUDES OF COLOMBIAN NURSES TOWARDS ALCOHOL, ALCOHOLISM AND INDIVIDUALS WITH ALCOHOL USE DISORDERS*

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To identify the attitudes of Colombian nurses towards alcohol, alcoholism and alcoholics, verifying their relationship with variables of interest in the study.

Method: Cross-sectional study whose data was collected in 2014 and 2015, through the use of the Scale of Attitudes towards Alcohol, Alcoholism and Alcoholics, Spanish version. The sample consisted of 303 nurses from health institutions of Bogotá, Colombia.

Results: Negative attitudes regarding interpersonal relationships with alcohol users in health care units and the etiology of alcoholism were observed in 56.8% of the participants. The associated factors were age, time elapsed since completion of the undergraduate nursing course, and frequency of care provided to individuals with alcohol use disorders.

Conclusions: The nursing professionals had ambivalent attitudes towards the phenomenon. Replication of this study in Latin American countries is suggested, in order to map the current status of this phenomenon in the South American hemisphere.

DESCRIPTORS: Nursing; Knowledge; Attitudes of health personnel; Alcoholic beverages; Alcoholism.


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ATITUDES FRENTE AO ÁLCOOL, AO ALCOOLISMO E À PESSOA COM TRANSTORNOS RELACIONADOS AO USO DE ÁLCOOL EM ENFERMEIROS COLOMBIANOS

RESUMO

Objetivo: identificar as atitudes dos enfermeiros colombianos frente ao álcool, ao alcoolismo e ao alcoolista, verificando sua relação com variáveis de interesse no estudo.

Método: estudo do tipo transversal, cujos dados foram coletados durante os anos 2014 e 2015, utilizando-se a Escala de atitudes frente ao álcool, ao alcoolismo e à pessoa com transtornos relacionados ao uso de álcool, versão em espanhol. A amostra constituiu-se de 303 enfermeiros de instituições de saúde de Bogotá, na Colômbia.

Resultados: observaram-se atitudes negativas em 56,8% dos participantes, frente às relações interpessoais com o usuário no trabalho e frente à etiologia do alcoolismo. Os fatores associados foram: idade, tempo de graduação e frequência no atendimento às pessoas com transtornos relacionados ao uso do álcool.

Conclusões: os profissionais de enfermagem apresentaram atitudes ambivalentes frente ao fenômeno. Sugere-se a replicação desse estudo em países da América Latina, na busca de mapear a atual situação desse fenômeno no hemisfério sul americano.

DESCRITORES: Enfermagem; Conhecimento; Atitude do pessoal de saúde; Bebidas alcoólicas; Alcoolismo.

ACTITUDES FRENTE AL ALCOHOL, AL ALCOHOLISMO Y A LA PERSONA CON TRASTORNOS RELACIONADOS AL USO DE ALCOHOL EN ENFERMEROS COLOMBIANOS

RESUMEN:

Objetivo: identificar las actitudes de los enfermeros colombianos frente al alcohol, al alcoholismo y a la persona con trastornos relacionados al uso de alcohol, verificando su relación con variables de interés en el estudio.

Método: estudio de tipo transversal, cuyos datos fueron recolectados durante los años 2014 y 2015, utilizando la Escala de actitudes frente al alcohol, al alcoholismo y a la persona con trastornos relacionados al uso de alcohol, versión en español. La muestra fue constituida por 303 enfermeros de instituciones de salud de Bogotá, en Colombia.

Resultados: Fueron observadas actitudes negativas en 56,8% de los participantes, frente a las relaciones interpersonales con el usuario en el trabajo y frente a la etiología del alcoholismo. Los factores asociados fueron: edad, tiempo de graduación, frecuencia en la atención de las personas con trastornos relacionados al uso de alcohol.

Conclusiones: Los profesionales de enfermería presentaron actitudes ambivalentes frente al fenómeno. Se sugiere la replicación de este estudio en países de América Latina, en la búsqueda de mapear la actual situación de este fenómeno en el hemisferio suramericano.

DESCRIPTORES: Enfermería; Conocimiento; Actitud del personal de salud; Bebidas alcohólicas; Alcoholismo.

INTRODUCTION

The higher levels of harmful use of alcohol by the population over the last decades have become a major concern in healthcare due to the significant damage involved⁽¹⁾. Most Latin American countries have been using different strategies to address this issue in healthcare services. However, the training of health professionals in that region is still moralistic and judgmental regarding the use of psychoactive substances.

Such training is pervaded by a negative and prejudiced attitude on the part of health professionals – which sometimes impairs nurse-user relationships, users' access to health services and adherence to the available treatment programs⁽²⁾. In Colombia, the way in which this phenomenon is perceived has been reproduced over time, perpetuating the logic of censorship and punishment influenced by the American repressive model, which is reflected in the National Statute of Narcotics, Law 30 of 1986⁽³⁾.

According to the latest survey conducted in Colombia, in 2013, about 2.6 million people aged 12-65 years make harmful use of alcohol, which corresponds to 31% of the Colombian population. Of these, 1.9 million are male and 0.6 million are female. The difference between the genders is considerably smaller when the rates of low-risk alcohol use among the general population are compared⁽⁴⁾.

These rates point to the need for strategies to deal more adequately with the population affected, such as the establishment of public policies, a solid health care network, and investment in the training and qualification of health professionals, with the inclusion of specific theoretical, technical and attitudinal skills that ensure the delivery of high quality care to individuals with alcohol use disorders⁽⁵⁾.

Therefore, it is important to recognize the role of nurses in this context, since these health professionals have greater contact with the individuals who seek health services, and are primarily responsible for improving the care delivered to individuals with alcohol use disorders⁽⁶⁻⁷⁾.

A study on the role of health professionals in 30 care centers for users of alcohol and other drugs conducted in Colombia⁽⁵⁾ found that only 6 (7%) of the 93 health professionals interviewed were nurses, demonstrating the shortage of these workers in the referred services. In addition, more than half of them did not have specific training or graduation in the area of alcohol and other drugs, suggesting that the nursing professionals available to assist this population are scarce and poorly trained.

The same study⁽⁵⁾ reported that the Colombian legislation failed to regulate nurses' role in health care institutions that provide care to alcoholics, emphasizing that the role of nurses includes aspects other than the operationalization of care, such as knowledge, values, attitudes and behaviors that must be known and recognized⁽⁵⁾. These aspects are the basis for the establishment of effective interpersonal relationships with individuals who seek care, and also make it possible to propose a transformation of the health care practices in services for users of alcohol and other drugs.

Analysis of the publications on nurses' attitudes towards alcoholism and related issues has shown that studies conducted in the United States⁽⁸⁾, Europe and Australia⁽⁹⁻¹¹⁾ suggest that health professionals with specific training in this area are more likely to have positive attitudes regarding the use of alcoholic beverages and care to individuals with alcohol use disorders. In contrast, professionals with little or no training in the referred area expressed negative attitudes, as they feared to face situations they did not feel prepared to manage.

Studies conducted in South America reported that health professionals, and particularly nurses, have more ambivalent attitudes than nurses from other parts of the world, with more positive attitudes towards alcohol and more negative attitudes when it comes to providing care to individuals with alcohol use disorders, because these professionals claim that alcoholics are people weak in character and difficult to manage⁽¹²⁻¹⁴⁾.

Although scarce, most Latin American studies about this subject were carried out in Brazil^(7,13–15). Thus, there are few studies on the subject in other South American countries, and specifically in Colombia where no publications addressing nurses' attitudes towards alcohol and related issues were found, indicating the need for studies to investigate the phenomenon in the referred region.

In view of the aforementioned, the present study aims to identify the attitudes of Colombian nurses towards alcohol, alcoholism and alcohol-related disorders, verifying their relationship with sociodemographic variables and professional training.

METHOD

Descriptive cross-sectional study extracted from a broader research project⁽¹⁶⁾, developed in medium and large health institutions in the city of Bogotá, Colombia. Data was collected between November 2014 and May 2015.

The health institutions covered in the present study are located in the department of Cundinamarca, including Bogotá, the Colombian capital. Data collection was performed in these institutions to meet the sample size requirements and also to ensure the presence of professionals from all healthcare levels.

Sample size calculation was based on the main project, which included 5 to 10 individuals for each item of the EAFAA scale, i.e., 250 to 480 individuals. The sample consisted of 303 nurses who fulfilled the inclusion criteria, as follows: native speaker of Spanish who had an employment contract in a health institution and who was performing his/her professional duties at the time of data collection. The exclusion criteria were inaccurate or incomplete completion of data collection instruments.

For data collection, the Spanish version of the Scale of Attitudes towards Alcohol, Alcoholism and Alcoholics (EAFAA) was used. It is a Likert-type scale composed of 48 items, divided into four factors: 1. Work and interpersonal relationships with individuals with alcohol use disorders; 2. Individual with alcohol use disorders; 3. Alcoholism (Etiology); and 4. Alcoholic beverages and their use, with response alternatives ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). The reliability of the Spanish version of the scale is 0.80, and the cut-off point is 3.2⁽¹⁶⁾, indicating that scores lower than the cut-off point should be considered as negative attitudes and higher scores, as positive attitudes towards alcohol, alcoholism and alcoholics.

For the collection of sociodemographic data and information related to the participants' knowledge about alcohol and other drugs, a questionnaire including topics related to age, marital status, gender, questions related to nurse training and experience with individuals with alcohol use disorders was administered.

The main researcher first contacted the nurses in the workplace and during each of the work shifts - morning, afternoon and evening. The objectives and the justification for the study were explained, and each participant received an envelope including the free and informed consent form, the sociodemographic questionnaire and the adapted version of the EAFAA, with instructions for its proper completion. The envelope should be returned immediately or, at most, within 24 hours.

The data collected was stored and analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), version 19. Descriptive statistics was used to describe the sample characteristics using measures of central tendency, absolute and relative frequencies. As for the verification of the attitudes, the sum of all means of the total EAFAA scores and of each component obtained by each participant was used, considering the cut-off point of the scale for defining positive and negative attitudes.

For the identification of the associations between sociodemographic variables and training with attitudes, the test of adherence and homogeneity was performed for all quantitative variables of the study. Based on these results, the use of the ANOVA multivariate analysis test was defined for variables related to the training of nurses (professional experience, frequency of contact with alcohol and other drug users, training on care targeted to individuals with disorders related to alcohol use); Spearman correlation test was used to verify the association between attitudes and variables age, time elapsed since completion of undergraduate nursing course and working hours, and finally the T-test for the variables gender and professional experience with alcohol users. A p value ≤ 0.05 was used in all the tests conducted during data analysis.

The present study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Nursing of Universidade de São Paulo, under protocol no 843.955 and by each one of the institutions that participated in the study.

RESULTS

Of the 303 nurses in the sample, 95% performed their professional activities in hospital care units (emergency room, intensive care unit, clinical admission), gynecology, pediatrics, and oncology) and 5% in specialized mental health services. Most respondents were female (77.9%), with a mean age of 32 (SD = 9.9), unmarried (49.5%), had graduated in the area (46.7%); had no professional experience in the care to individuals with alcohol use disorders (56%) and who reported they did not receive specific training in the area of dependence of alcohol and other drugs during nursing training (42.3%).

The results obtained through the EAFAA (Spanish version) score showed that most nurses (172 -56.8%) had negative attitudes, with an average response of 3.0 for women and 3.1 for men. Analysis of the attitudes according to each of the four factors on the scale indicated that negative attitudes were more prevalent regarding nurses' perception of interpersonal relationships with users at work ($\mu = 2.6$), that is, in the care relationship. On the other hand, these professionals had more positive attitudes towards alcoholism ($\mu = 3.6$), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 – Descriptive statistics of the mean score obtained by nurses in each of the four factors of EAFAA. Bogotá, Colombia, 2015

Factor	μ	SD
1. Work and interpersonal relationships with individuals with alcohol use disorders	2.6	0.6
2. Individual with alcohol use disorders	3.6	0.7
3. Alcoholism	2.8	0.3
4. Alcoholic beverages and their use	3.2	0.4

Concerning the association between the sociodemographic and vocational training aspects with the score obtained in the attitudes scale, the only demographic variable that proved to be significant by Spearman test was the time elapsed since completion of undergraduate nursing course ($r=0.8$). There were significant associations between attitudes and frequency of care delivered ($P = 0.04$) and with previous specific work experience in the area ($P = 0.000$) (Table 2).

Table 2 - Association between the variables of academic training and EAFAA scores (Spanish version) in nursing professionals. Bogotá, Colombia, 2015

Variables	EAFAA Score		P-value \leq 0.05
	μ	SD	
Previous professional experience			
No	3.08	0.33	0.00*
Yes	3.11	0.44	
Frequency of care			
Never	3.10	0.33	0.04**
Monthly	3.03	0.43	
Weekly	3.11	0.45	
Daily	3.23	0.41	
Graduation			
No	3.11	0.38	0.1**
Specialization	3.05	0.37	
Masters/PhD	3.25	0.50	
Specific training in care for individuals with alcohol use disorders			
No	3.15	0.36	0.3*
Yes	3.11	0.40	

*T-Test - ** ANOVA

Analysis of the theoretical dimension (factors) showed that the nurses who reported having daily contact with individuals with alcohol use disorders had more positive attitudes towards work and interpersonal relationships with these alcohol users than those who claimed they had never had such contact, and the difference in this attitudinal factor (F1) ($p=0.05$) was statistically significant.

Regarding factor 2 and factor 4, age ($p=0.001$) and time elapsed since completion of undergraduate studies ($p=0.000$) showed statistically significant associations with the EAFAA score: the older the health professionals and the longer the time elapsed since completion of undergraduate studies, the more negative their attitudes toward alcohol and individuals with alcohol use disorders were.

According to the results obtained for factor 4, separately, it was found that the variables gender ($p=0.004$) and professional expertise in the area (0.004) were statistically significant, and men: 67 (22.1%) and the nurses who had been specifically trained for providing care to alcoholics: 174 (57.62%) showed more positive attitudes towards alcoholic beverages and their use.

DISCUSSION

The results suggest that the nurses' attitudes towards alcohol, alcoholism and individuals with alcohol-use related disorders were in general predominantly negative. However, the values obtained were very close to the cut-off point (3.2), which suggests that they might have ambivalent attitudes toward the dimensions assessed by the EAFAA.

Such ambivalence may be related to the stigmatization of alcohol use and individuals with alcohol use disorders still present in the Latin American culture, and to the lack of content and practices related to this subject in nursing curriculum, which is corroborated by studies conducted in Latin American countries, including Bolivia⁽¹²⁾, Colombia⁽¹⁷⁾ and Brazil^(13,18-19) that stressed the ambivalent attitudes towards care to users of alcohol and other drugs.

When these factors were analyzed separately, it was found that the health professionals who reported having professional experience in this health care area, as well as daily contact with individuals with alcohol use disorders, were generally likely to have more positive attitudes, which was also observed among the nurses who had a postgraduate degree.

The differences and relationships between the factors highlight again the ambivalence in the professionals' attitudes, which is consistent with studies conducted in the Americas^(6,13), because alcoholic drinks, which are licit and socially-accepted substances, are also accepted by health professionals who have positive attitudes towards their use.

On the other hand, the participants showed a negative attitude towards alcohol users who had problems related to such use, which can be related to their social concepts of the referred population that pervade health actions and lead to stigmatization, making the establishment of ties between users and health professionals more difficult. This is also reported in several relevant studies^(12,19).

Through the mapping of the attitudes of nursing professionals from a Latin American region, the present study sheds light on the perceptions, beliefs and values of this professional occupation towards the care to individuals with alcohol use disorders and on some factors that may be related to the presence of more negative attitudes of these nurses, compared to studies conducted in Brazil. On the other hand, association between the time elapsed since completion of undergraduate studies and more negative attitudes suggests that this phenomenon was observed in Latin American countries^(13,20-21), contrasting with the findings of studies conducted in Europe⁽¹¹⁾ and the United States⁽²²⁾, in which this relationship is the opposite, that is, among nurses in these regions, longer contact with the referred population had a positive impact on the professionals' attitudes towards users of alcohol and other drugs.

This fact may be related to the low visibility and low recognition of the role of nurses in this area in Colombia, raising several questions about the legitimacy of health professionals and indirectly reinforcing the negative attitudes of these professionals towards individuals with disorders, including stigmatization, associated to the use of psychoactive substances⁽⁵⁾. In addition, as other studies⁽¹³⁾ have pointed out, older professionals who had graduated long ago may have a more generalized view of individuals with alcohol use disorders.

Professional experience and specific training in health care services to alcohol and substance users had a statistically significant association with the positive attitudes of nurses - which can be explained by the confidence in the legitimacy of nurses' performance in the care to individuals with alcohol use disorders. This confidence is the result from permanent training, preparation, and discussion.

Such statements were identified in studies on the relationship between knowledge, training and experiences of health professionals and attitudes towards alcohol use and related issues. These studies highlight the difficulty in dealing with the referred population, and such difficulty is caused by the lack of expertise in the early identification of the disorder and the lack of approach strategies^(10,23). The studies have also debated the role of specific training in the area on the care to substance users, and on the motivation and confidence of the health professionals who provide such care^(11,13).

One limitation of this study is that it was carried out in a specific region of the Colombian territory and in public institutions. Therefore, its results cannot be generalized for the entire nursing population of Colombia.

CONCLUSION

The data obtained suggests that Colombian nurses had negative attitudes towards alcohol, alcoholism and alcoholics. Thus, it is necessary to strengthen the profile of attitudes of nurses, favoring their interaction with this clientele as soon as they complete the nursing undergraduate course, and improving the training of nurses on care targeted to these specific users, since nurses make up the largest section of health profession.

The present study may have an important impact on nursing in Latin America, given the scarcity of studies on the attitudes of nurses towards alcohol and related issues developed in this area. In addition, it contributes to the construction of an updated reading about the attitudes of workers of this professional occupation towards alcohol and the issues associated with its use, providing a reflection on the insertion and improvement of the contents related to care to users with disorders associated to alcohol use in the curricula of nursing undergraduate courses, with the purpose of stimulating a closer contact of nursing students with this population as early as possible.

Replication studies that identify the attitudes of nurses in other countries of Hispanic America are suggested in order to map the situation of the South American hemisphere. This will make it possible to draw a profile of the attitudes of health professionals in this part of the continent and propose strategies for intervention in this scenario, taking into account the factors that positively impact such attitudes.

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