

FREE COMMUNICATION

PARTICIPATION OF NURSING STUDENTS IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Mariana André Honorato Franzoi¹, Fernanda Leticia Frates Cauduro²

ABSTRACT

Objective: To reflect on the participation of nursing students in the COVID-19 pandemic.


Development: Considering the recent events in the Brazilian health scenario and the strategic actions including nursing students in tackling the pandemic, reflections on their competences, accountabilities, obligations, and duties must be considered. We discuss the positions of regulatory bodies and entities on the participation of nursing students in the current pandemic scenario.


Final considerations: In view of the growing number of infected health professionals, there is an urgent need to ensure strategic, safe, and responsible participation of nursing students who make themselves available to be in health care institutions, providing nursing care and assistance to patients with suspected or confirmed infection by COVID-19.

DESCRIPTORS: Nursing; Nursing Students; COVID-19; Coronavirus Infection; Pandemics.

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¹Nurse. Master's degree in Nursing. Nursing Professor at the University of Brasília. Brasília, DF, Brazil. 

²Nurse. PhD in Sciences. Nursing Professor at the University of Brasília. Brasília, DF, Brazil. 

ATUAÇÃO DE ESTUDANTES DE ENFERMAGEM NA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19

RESUMO

Objetivo: refletir sobre a atuação de estudantes de graduação em enfermagem durante a pandemia de Covid-19.

Desenvolvimento: ao se considerarem os recentes acontecimentos no cenário da saúde brasileira e as ações estratégicas que incluem os estudantes de enfermagem no combate à pandemia, reflexões acerca das competências, responsabilidades, obrigações e deveres desses devem ser consideradas. Discute-se as posições de entidades e órgãos regulamentadores sobre a participação dos estudantes de enfermagem no atual cenário pandêmico.

Considerações finais: diante do crescente número de profissionais de saúde infectados, é premente assegurar atuação estratégica, segura e responsável de estudantes de enfermagem que se colocam disponíveis para estar em instituições de saúde, prestando cuidado e assistência de enfermagem a pacientes suspeitos ou confirmados pela Covid-19.

DESCRITORES: Enfermagem; Estudantes de Enfermagem; Covid-19; Infecções por Coronavírus; Pandemias.

ACTUACIÓN DE ESTUDIANTES DE ENFERMERÍA EN LA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19

RESUMEN:

Objetivo: reflexionar sobre la actuación de estudiantes de grado de Enfermería durante la pandemia de Covid-19.

Desarrollo: al considerar los acontecimientos recientes en el escenario de la salud en Brasil y las acciones estratégicas que incluyen a los estudiantes de Enfermería en la lucha contra la pandemia, deben ponderarse diversas reflexiones acerca de sus competencias, responsabilidades, obligaciones y deberes. Se debaten las posturas de entidades y órganos reguladores sobre la participación de los estudiantes de Enfermería en el escenario de pandemia actual.

Consideraciones finales: frente a una creciente cantidad de profesionales de salud infectados, resulta urgente garantizar la actuación estratégica, segura y responsable de los estudiantes de Enfermería que se ponen a disposición para trabajar en instituciones de salud, prestando servicios de cuidado y atención de Enfermería a casos sospechosos o confirmados de pacientes infectados con Covid-19.

DESCRIPTORES: Enfermería; Estudiantes de Enfermería; Covid-19; Infecciones por Coronavirus; Pandemias.

INTRODUCTION

The Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS–Cov-2) pandemic has been challenging the world's public health given the increasing number of cases, which in turn demand specialized assistance and health care measurements⁽¹⁾. In Brazil, the first case was confirmed in late February 2020 and, after 60 days of the initial case, 61,888 infected individuals and 4,205 deaths were accounted for in the country⁽²⁾.

The disease, called COVID-19, is a respiratory syndrome transmitted by the virus from droplets coming from coughing or sneezing of the infected person, which can reach the upper airway. It can be transmitted by direct contact with infected individuals, such as skin-to-skin contact, or indirect contact by touching contaminated surfaces and objects. The possibility of transmission has been studied through aerosols, microparticles generated during specific procedures such as orotracheal intubation that remain suspended in the air for long periods and, when inhaled, can penetrate more deeply into the respiratory tract⁽³⁾.

The individual may develop mild, flu-like, or severe symptoms that result in respiratory syndrome and need for specialized service⁽⁴⁾.

Hitherto, there are no specific treatments for the new disease, with community containment measures being the only disease control tool currently available as a strategy to mitigate the speed of COVID-19 progression and avoid overloading the health system⁽⁵⁾. In this context, wide social distancing measures have been adopted by several Brazilian states and counties⁽⁵⁾, outstanding the closing of stores, schools, and universities.

Since the suspension of classes, several higher education institutions have maintained distance learning activities, but many federal universities have suspended the academic calendar due to inequalities among students in access to technological resources and the Internet⁽⁶⁾.

Before the consequences of COVID-19, Provisional Measure No. 934 of 2020⁽⁷⁾ exceptionally exempts the obligation of a minimum of days of effective academic work over the school year and allows for the abbreviation of the duration of medicine, pharmacy, nursing, and physiotherapy courses so that new graduates can work in the pandemic.

In addition, Ordinance No. 356 of March 20th, 2020, of the Ministry of Education (MEC), authorizes students in the last year of the nursing course to work in areas compatible with the internships and specific practices of the course in the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic⁽⁸⁾.

It is important to highlight Ordinance No. 492 of March 23th, 2020, which institutes the Strategic Action called "Brazil Counts on Me", targeted at bringing health course students for combating the pandemic, and which was edited by the Ministry of Health (MoH), aiming to optimize the availability of human resources in the health services within the Unified Health System (*Sistema Único de Saúde, SUS*) in order to contain the effects of Covid-19 in an integrated manner with the graduation activities of the medical, nursing, pharmacy, and physiotherapy courses of the federal education system⁽⁹⁾.

On April 4th, 2020, the Brazilian Nursing Association (*Associação Brasileira de Enfermagem, ABEn*) expressed in an official note a position contrary to MS Ordinance No. 492 and to Provisional Measure No. 934⁽¹⁰⁾. On April 9th, the Federal Nursing Council (*Conselho Federal de Enfermagem, COFEN*), alongside the twenty-seven Regional Nursing Councils of the Brazilian federation, expressed its position on such government initiatives by opposing MEC Ordinance No. 356, with regard mainly to nurses acting as supervisors of volunteer students in combating the pandemic⁽¹¹⁾.

Considering such events on the national scene, the following questions for reflection are proposed: What are the claims of regulatory bodies and agencies about the participation of nursing students in the COVID-19 pandemic? Are the students prepared to be at this

frontline?

Given these questions, this free communication aims to reflect on the participation of undergraduate nursing students during the Covid-19 pandemic.

DEVELOPMENT

Faced with the current scenario of uncertainties, differences in the participation of health students during the Covid-19 pandemic vary greatly among countries and institutions⁽¹²⁾.

In the international scope, some schools prohibit any interactions with the patients, while others recruit students for job posts in hospitals or even speed up the degree so that they can serve in the frontline in tackling this new disease⁽¹²⁾. In the United Kingdom, in addition to the construction of several field hospitals to reinforce the availability of health professionals in the network, nursing and medical students in the last years of undergraduate studies have been invited to participate in paid work in health institutions with recently retired National Health Service professionals⁽¹³⁾.

In the Brazilian context, the Ministries of Education and of Health published, respectively, Ordinance No. 356, which disposes on the performance of the students from the health courses in the combat against COVID-19⁽⁸⁾, and Ordinance No. 492, which establishes the Strategic Action called "Brazil Counts on Me"⁽⁹⁾.

Considering the need to optimize the availability of health services within the SUS for containing the pandemic, these ordinances provide for the possibility of nursing students in the last year of graduation to participate and also ensure several benefits to volunteers, such as the utilization of the workload completed in the Strategic Action in the mandatory curricular internship, additional score in the process of public selection for Internship in Health Programs promoted by the Ministry of Health, and obtaining a discount on the amount of the monthly fee, to be defined and granted by the private educational institutions to which they are connected^(8,9).

In order to sensitize students to volunteer, in addition to the series of advantages listed in the ordinances, statements of emotional appeal from federal educational and health managers broadcast by the media suggest that students have a social duty to carry out this work^(14,15). However, it is not clear in the official documents how the student's educational-assistance process will be carried out to ensure safe learning and assistance⁽¹¹⁾.

Do these government policies, developed without the direct participation of class entities and the universities, collaborate with or hinder the hitherto proposed strategies to combat the pandemic and the training of health students, especially nursing ones?

The Brazilian Nursing Association (ABEn) expressed in a note a position contrary to the participation of nursing students in the pandemic, when considering factors such as demand and overload of human resources that are in the frontline by supervising internship activities, in addition to the structure of the health services to incorporate the students – especially due to the scarcity of personal protection equipment (PPE), which is being used rationally in health facilities due to supply shortages⁽¹⁰⁾.

The COFEN ratifies this position by pointing out that nursing professionals, who account for 60% of the human resources in the health service in Brazil, are experiencing physical and mental exhaustion due to the colossal efforts they are facing every day with the work overload in the country's hospital networks, and it is therefore inappropriate that in this pandemic scenario they are assigned the task of supervising students⁽¹¹⁾.

From March 13th to the date of publication of the COFEN official note, the Nursing

Councils received more than 3,500 complaints regarding the scarcity, absence, or inadequacy of PPE in the health services. Without minimum protection, the students become potential vectors of the disease and put their families and communities at risk⁽¹¹⁾.

Both the ABEn and the COFEN pointed out that there is no mention to the Law of Internship Regulation, which generates legal instability in relation to compulsory insurance in favor of the student, in case of harms or accident^(10,11). The entities emphasized that the students, even in the last study year, are in training and developing essential skills and competencies to the practice and should not be seen as workforce, after all, guaranteeing the quality and the integral formation of the students without shortening the duration of the course is to defend health and save lives^(10,11).

In fact, nursing students are developing skills and competencies for the effective practice of the profession, which, according to the National Curricular Guidelines (*Diretrizes Curriculares Nacionais*, DCNs), aims at the profile of a generalist, critical and reflexive nurse, with technical-scientific, ethical-political, and socio-educational competencies⁽¹⁶⁾.

Since the publication of the DCNs, different movements for curriculum reform have taken place in nursing schools, which have enabled changes in teaching-learning processes by prioritizing strategies that value significant learning, stimulate student protagonism, advocate for the adoption of active methodologies and promote teaching and service interaction, with the early insertion of the students in practice scenarios in search of greater approximation to the real health needs of the Brazilian population. This process is a real break in the paradigms and roles of the students, teachers, and the university in the training and social sphere, in comparison with what used to be the case with the minimum curriculum^(17,18).

The paradigm changes in nursing education have influenced a more humanistic posture, decision making with greater safety and assertiveness, care focused on the needs of the individual/community in a constant action-reflection-action movement, and notorious ethical and social commitment of the newly graduated. However, the literature signals the need for a better appropriation of knowledge, skills, and attitudes by the young nurses, which are essential and fundamental for effective work in the area^(17,18).

In relation to the training provided for in Ordinance No. 492 for the students who accept to volunteer⁽⁹⁾, even if documents and instructional material on screening, risk classification, and therapeutic management of suspect or confirmed COVID-19 patients are made available, the consolidation cannot be asserted of all the competencies needed for the practice in the context of the pandemic. The development of skills requires, above all, knowing how to learn, which occurs through successive constructions, deconstructions, and reconstructions of knowledge, attitudes, and skills: it is something procedural, which occurs over time⁽¹⁸⁾.

If, in usual conditions, the health services are faced with important limitations in basic and specific competencies of nursing graduates, how will the insertion of students, or even of graduates who had early left graduation, be to assist, educate and manage in a scenario of tension generated by the new coronavirus, and that demands consolidated technical-scientific and ethical-political competencies?

Regarding the use of the workload, the MoH Strategic Action does not consider the heterogeneity of fields for carrying out the supervised internship. At the end of graduation, it is made possible for the student to experience the professional practice in different scenarios, both in primary care and in secondary and tertiary care services. By determining the health facilities where students will work⁽⁹⁾, the chance can be restricted of the student to know and improve skills and competencies in varied and heterogeneous scenarios, essential for a generalist practice as laid down in the DCNs⁽¹⁶⁾.

As a counterpoint, the pandemic can be seen as an opportunity for students to develop or strengthen skills already under construction since the early years of graduation. However, with the growing number of infected individuals, especially health professionals,

it is necessary to advocate for quality of care, preserving the safety of users, professionals, and students in the health care services. After all, without adequate protection and clinical experience, the students may be potential additional vectors in viral transmission and consume more PPE, which is already scarce, leading to dissemination of the virus in the community⁽¹²⁾.

Thus, it cannot be asserted that the participation of the nursing student will guarantee better results in health and in the optimization of the human resources in this scenario, given the need for their supervision by increasingly physically and mentally exhausted nursing professionals facing overcrowding in several health services and who, even with clinical experience, are getting infected – there are 10 thousand nursing workers infected by the COVID-19 in Brazil⁽¹⁹⁾.

The ABEn recommends that the students be summoned only as a last resort, when other alternatives are already exhausted, such as hiring selected nurses in selection processes and emergency hiring of newly graduated professionals⁽¹⁰⁾. The COFEN considers untimely the insertion of students in the current scenario of emergency in public health since the Brazilian nursing workforce has 2,230,000 nursing professionals suitable for the professional practice⁽¹¹⁾.

The ABEn's and COFEN's positioning is in line with that of the American Association of Medical Schools, which has strongly recommended medical schools to discourage student involvement in direct patient care at this time of the pandemic, except in a critical workforce context⁽¹²⁾.

In addition to the risks of contamination, the students are subjected to psycho-emotional risks by volunteering to act on the frontline⁽¹²⁾. Recent articles have shown that feelings of anxiety and vulnerability among students and interns in Nursing and Medicine in the United States and Europe compete internally with the desire and commitment to care for patients with COVID-19^(13,20).

The students are confronted with the unique opportunity in history to contribute and learn that, rather than personal gratification, it refers to the value of citizens and professionals⁽⁹⁾. On the other hand, they suffer from the recurrent concern of infecting loved ones and other people outside the hospital or even causing harm to patients due to the technical limitation^(13,20).

Many nursing students in the UK reported experiencing moral distress from not volunteering in the Covid-19 setting, either because of impossibilities arising from some medical condition, which puts them in a risk group, or even because of fear and pressure from family and friends over the risk of contracting the virus⁽¹³⁾.

It is not up to anyone to judge the decision of the students who volunteered but to ask if there are other safer forms of contribution. Community-directed health education through the creation and dissemination of information materials in social media can be considered an impacting strategic action by students in combating Covid-19⁽²¹⁾.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In view of the growing number of infected health professionals, there is an urgent need to ensure strategic, safe, and responsible participation of nursing students who make themselves available to be in health care institutions, providing nursing care and assistance to patients with suspected or confirmed infection by COVID-19. Safer ways for the students' participation in the combat against the pandemic should be encouraged, such as action on health education promotion through social media.

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Corresponding author:

Mariana André Honorato Franzoi

Universidade de Brasília

Campus Universitário Darcy Ribeiro, Asa Norte – 70910-900 – Brasília, DF, Brasil

E-mail: marifranzoiunb@gmail.com

Role of Authors:

Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work - MAHF

Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content - MAHF, FLFC

Final approval of the version to be published - MAHF, FLFC



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