








SPOTLIGHTS ON DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: PARADOXES IN THE NURSING WORK PROCESS

HOLOFOTES ACESOS DURANTE A PANDEMIA DA COVID-19: PARADOXOS DO PROCESSO DE TRABALHO DA ENFERMAGEM

REFLECTORES ENCENDIDOS DURANTE LA PANDEMIA DEL COVID-19: CONTRADICCIONES DEL PROCESO DE TRABAJO DE ENFERMERÍA

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ABSTRACT

Objective: to approach critically and reflexively the paradoxes related to the working conditions of Nursing, the (de)valuation of the profession in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic and the need to think about promoting healthy work environments. Covid-19 disease is a pandemic that is influencing contemporary lifestyle and work habits. Nursing professionals are the largest number of workers working on the front lines in the fight against this disease. The routine of these professionals was already exhausting, but in times of pandemic the workload becomes greater and the shifts more stressful, due to several factors such as: fear of contamination, deficient information, scarcity of human and material resources. Thus, it is urgent to promote healthy environments, as recommended by the World Health Organization, aiming at the safety, health, and well-being of workers. **Method:** reflective study carried out from the scientific literature and the critical analysis of the authors, addressing working conditions and valuing Nursing, indicating the paradoxes related to the work process. **Results:** this reflection addressed important challenges for Nursing. At the same time that the professionals fight in defense of life, fighting Covid-19 based on scientific knowledge, humanized attitudes and ethical precepts, the profession is still undervalued and experiences precarious working conditions. **Conclusion:** the expectation is that the spotlight will remain on for Nursing, even after the pandemic, "illuminating" better working conditions and professional recognition, in addition to healthy working environments with concrete measures for the present and the future.

Keywords: Coronavirus Infections; Working Conditions; Nursing, Practical; Nurse Practitioners; Working Environment; Health Management.

RESUMO

Objetivo: abordar de forma crítica e reflexiva os paradoxos relacionados às condições de trabalho da Enfermagem, de (des) valorização da profissão diante da pandemia da Covid-19 e da necessidade de se pensar em promoção de ambientes de trabalho saudáveis. A doença Covid-19 é uma pandemia que está influenciando os hábitos de vida e o trabalho contemporâneo. Os profissionais da Enfermagem são o maior número de trabalhadores atuantes na linha de frente no combate a essa doença. A rotina desses profissionais já era exaustiva, mas em tempos de pandemia a carga de trabalho torna-se maior e os turnos mais estressantes, devido a vários fatores como: medo de contaminação, informações deficientes, escassez de recursos humanos e materiais. Assim, torna-se urgente promover ambientes saudáveis, conforme recomenda a Organização Mundial de Saúde, visando a segurança, saúde e bem-estar dos trabalhadores. **Método:** estudo reflexivo realizado a partir da literatura científica e da análise crítica das autoras, abordando condições de trabalho e valorização da Enfermagem, indicando os

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paradoxos relacionados ao processo de trabalho. Resultados: essa reflexão abordou importantes desafios para a Enfermagem. Ao mesmo tempo em que os profissionais lutam em defesa da vida, combatendo a Covid-19 pautados em conhecimentos científicos, atitudes humanizadas e nos preceitos éticos, a profissão ainda é desvalorizada e vivencia condições de trabalho precárias. Conclusão: a expectativa é de os holofotes permanecerem acesos para a Enfermagem, mesmo após a pandemia, "iluminando" melhores condições de trabalho e reconhecimento profissional, além de ambientes laborais saudáveis com medidas concretas para o presente e o futuro.

Palavras-chave: Infecções por Coronavirus; Condições de Trabalho; Enfermagem Prática; Profissionais de Enfermagem; Ambiente de Trabalho; Gestão em Saúde.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: enfocar de manera crítica y reflexiva las contradicciones de las condiciones de trabajo de enfermería, de (des) valorización de la profesión ante la pandemia del Covid-19 y la necesidad de pensar en la promoción de ambientes de trabajo saludables. El Covid-19 es una pandemia que afecta costumbres y trabajo. La cantidad de profesionales de enfermería que actúan en la línea de frente de combate a la enfermedad es superior a la de los demás profesionales. La rutina de dicho personal ya solía ser agotadora y, ahora, en tiempos de pandemia, la carga laboral es aún mayor y los turnos más desgastantes a causa de factores tales como el temor al contagio, información deficiente, escasez de recursos humanos y material. Por ello, es urgente promover ambientes saludables, tal como lo recomienda la Organización Mundial de la Salud, con miras a la seguridad, salud y bienestar de los trabajadores. Método: estudio reflexivo realizado a partir de la literatura científica y del análisis crítico de las autoras, quienes enfocan las condiciones laborales y valorización de Enfermería y muestran las contradicciones del proceso laboral. Resultados: esta reflexión enfocó desafíos importantes para Enfermería. Mientras los profesionales luchan por la vida y combaten el Covid-19 en base a conocimiento científico, actitudes humanizadas y principios éticos, la profesión está desvalorizada socialmente y los trabajadores conviven con condiciones laborales precarias. Conclusión: hay expectativas de que los reflectores permanezcan encendidos enfocando Enfermería, aún después de la pandemia, "iluminando" mejores condiciones de trabajo y reconocimiento profesional, además de ambientes laborales saludables, con medidas concretas para el presente y el futuro.

Palabras clave: Infecciones por Coronavirus; Condiciones de Trabajo; Enfermería Práctica; Enfermeras Practicantes; Ambiente de Trabajo; Gestión en Salud.

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic of Covid-19 disease (Corona Virus Disease), caused by the new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, has profoundly affected the *modus operandi* of populations as a whole, influencing the habits of life and the way in which work is carried out

contemporary. Thus, the risks that this situation causes, and its effects have led to the global effort of researchers and scientists in search of viable alternatives for the preservation of life.¹

The speed of transmissibility and the lethality rate of the new coronavirus caused the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare, on January 30, 2020, the disease as a worldwide public health emergency. And on March 11 it was considered a pandemic. While studies are still inconclusive with regard to the vaccine as an effective prevention strategy and even in relation to the most effective drug treatment and with fewer side effects, some measures to control the progression of the transmission curve have been recommended by official health agencies. The identification of symptomatic patients stands out, with the performance of rapid tests and isolation; the identification of the communicants, placing them in quarantine; and the protection of health professionals through the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE).²

In this sense, the WHO includes specific measures necessary to protect the safety and health of professionals who are at the front line of the Covid-19 pandemic, highlighting the dangers to which they are subject, such as, for example, exposure to pathogens, long hours of work, psychological distress, fatigue, stigma, among others.³

Among the professionals who work on the front line in combating and controlling the spread of the current pandemic, Nursing represents the largest category, both in public and private institutions, being the only team present in the assistance 24 hours a day in direct contact with the patient.⁴ The Nursing team represents approximately 50% of the global workforce, with 20 million nurses and 2 million midwives, being considered the backbone of the global health system.⁵

In this sense, the daily work of these teams is marked by exhaustive routines and unfavorable working conditions in most health organizations, which does not agree with the WHO recommendations regarding the importance of promoting healthy work environments, thus constituting threat to the health, safety and well-being of these workers.⁶

It is known that the Nursing work process is commonly marked by intense work rhythms, long hours, shift work, low wages, complex human relationships, lack of materials and human resources, in addition to professionals facing pain experiences, suffering and death. All of these determinants end up exposing workers to situations of vulnerability that can lead to illness.⁷

This context worsens in the face of the state of public calamity due to the Covid-19 pandemic, as the workload becomes even greater and the shifts more stressful, associated with the fear of contamination, the flow of information sometimes deficient and the scarcity human and material resources. This can be seen in television and social network media, which show daily reports that denounce the working conditions of the team through this current situation, with emphasis on the lack of PPE.

It is noteworthy that, in addition to the adequate provision of PPE, at this time it is also necessary to welcome Nursing professionals, opening a listening space to know their real needs and expectations, especially those due to the new coronavirus. With a view to promoting healthy work environments, it is necessary to rethink working conditions as a safe physical structure for the performance of activities, adequate dimensioning of professionals, design of service flows, cooperation for working in teams, support from leaders, among others.

Thus, the pandemic lit the world spotlight for the work performed by the Nursing teams and their weaknesses. In Brazil, data from the Federal Nursing Council (*Conselho Federal de Enfermagem*- COFEN) reveal that up to September 3, 2020, more than 37 thousand suspected cases were registered among Nursing professionals and 396 deaths associated with the disease. The number of Brazilian deaths already exceeds the number recorded in Italy, the first epicenter of the disease in the West.⁸

Faced with this scenario, paradoxically, the year 2020 was declared by WHO as the “International Year of Nursing and Midwives”, in honor of the bicentenary of the anniversary of Florence Nightingale, an iconic figure that institutionalized Nursing as a profession. From this perspective, in 2018, a worldwide Nursing valorization campaign was also launched, called Nursing Now, in partnership with the International Nursing Council and other class councils from different countries.⁹

On the issue of valuing Nursing, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) produced a report, starting with the 29th Pan American Sanitary Conference, held in Washington in September 2017, reflecting on the importance of valuing human resources for access and universal health coverage. This document states that it is necessary to invest and value Nursing professionals, recognizing their contributions to improve the quality of health care. In addition, it presents strategic guidelines for advancing, strengthening and valuing Nursing in health systems and services, according to the following lines of action: strengthening and consolidating the leadership and strategic management of Nursing in health systems; address the working conditions and skills of Nursing professionals; strengthen the quality of Nursing education to meet the needs of health systems aimed at universal access to health.¹⁰

Therefore, taking into account the international scenario of Covid-19 and the global campaign to enhance the profession, as teachers, academics and health professionals, we were encouraged to reflect on the conditions and work process of Nursing, focusing on the relevance of promoting healthy environments.

Thus, the authors asked themselves: would this not be a favorable moment for Nursing to demonstrate its strength, its work, and its importance in healthcare environments, especially in the face of the challenge of this pandemic?

In view of the above and of such questioning, this article aims to critically and reflexively address the paradoxes related to the

working conditions of Nursing and the (un)appreciation of the profession in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic and the need to think promoting healthy work environments.

As a methodological guideline, we sought to discuss, in general lines, about some paradoxes of the Nursing work process, raised from the authors’ experiences and professional trajectory, analyzing them in the face of scientific literature and the scenario of Covid-19. The reflections in this article resulted from the importance of thinking critically about the need to promote healthy environments for Nursing professionals, as recommended by the WHO; as a strategy to protect the health of these workers and, consequently, to offer safe care to the population.

PARADOXES IN NURSING WORK IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC

In this panorama of the Covid-19 pandemic, some paradoxes of Nursing work, which will be described below, were in evidence and can become important points of reflection to be discussed in health services, in educational institutions, in different spaces of the society and in the news media. This can contribute to the reorganization of services, professional training, and the development of public policies, especially in the area of occupational health.

The devaluation of the worker, inadequate remuneration and lack of investment by employers in the workplace generate feelings of frustration and helplessness, leading to physical and mental exhaustion¹¹, thus compromising the quality of life at work.

Therefore, better working conditions for Nursing have been widely debated through demands such as, for example, working hours appropriate to the category and compatible wage floor. Exactly 20 years ago the Bill (PL, *Projeto de Lei*) 2295/2000, which provides for Work Hours of Nurses, Technicians and Nursing Assistants, has been in the National Congress, setting it at six hours a day and 30 hours a week. PL 459/2015 has also been underway for five years, which includes setting a wage floor for the three professional categories of Nursing¹² and more recently, in this pandemic, PL 2564/2020 is open for voting in the Federal Senate to institute the wage floor.

However, despite the fact that Brazil currently has more than 558,177 nurses, 1.3 million technicians and 417,540 Nursing assistants,¹³ these bills have not been approved, which further contributes to the precariousness of Nursing work.

A recent study showed that the Nursing team’s process and work environment are permeated by conditions that predispose to excessive workloads, which cause work-related illnesses and accidents, in addition to physical, psychological and absenteeism, damaging workers’ health Nursing, the institution and safe patient care. Thus, organizational actions are needed to prevent accidents and illnesses related to work, aiming at reducing loads and promoting the health of Nursing workers.¹⁴

It is in this perspective that, through the commemorative year of Nursing and in the midst of this pandemic, the need to emphasize the importance of promoting healthy environments, as recommended by the WHO, becomes even more urgent.

Thus, the WHO document published in 2010, translated into Portuguese by the Social Service of Industry (SESI) under the title: "Healthy work environments: a model for action for employers, workers, policy makers and professionals", can be a reference to mobilize efforts to prioritize the safety, health and well-being of workers. In that document, a healthy work environment is defined as that.

[...] in which workers and managers collaborate to use a process of continuous improvement of the protection and promotion of the safety, health, and well-being of all workers and for the sustainability of the work environment [...].¹⁵

The model presented in that document proposes a multidimensional analysis for the work environment, through the articulation of four dimensions: physical environment; psychosocial environment; resources for personal health; and the organization's involvement in the community. Such articulation allows an expanded look at the Nursing work process with a view to promoting the safety, health and well-being of these professionals, the focus of this theoretical reflection.

The first dimension refers to the physical work environment related to factors such as: physical structure, air, machinery, furniture, products, chemicals, materials, and production processes. Depending on the dangers that these factors can pose to the worker, they have the potential to affect their safety, health, and well-being, thus not contributing to a healthy physical environment. The aforementioned document makes it clear, for example, that the provision of adequate PPE for worker protection is an important way to reduce physical hazards in the work environment.¹⁵

That is why PPEs need to be standardized according to what the WHO and the Ministry of Health recommend, because during a pandemic the scarcity of these protective materials can become an ethical and moral dilemma for Nursing professionals, since they can legally refuse service if the activity poses a risk to their physical integrity. However, in daily life what is observed is that these professionals, in most cases, risk their lives for the benefit of their patients.¹¹

The psychosocial environment is the second dimension and encompasses organizational culture, attitudes, values, beliefs, and daily practices and, if it is influenced by "stressful" factors, it can compromise the physical and mental well-being of workers. These factors are characterized by a poor work organization; lack of flexibility in decisions and negotiations; lack of reward, recognition and support from leaders; deficient policies, rules and procedures related to dignity and respect for workers; and yet, failure in reciprocal communication and constructive feedback. As a way to reduce these stressors, the WHO document cites the reallocation

of activities to reduce work overload, the training of managers in communication and leadership, in addition to the application of zero tolerance for harassment and discrimination in the workplace.¹⁵

Among the factors that cover this second dimension, an effective reorganization of the work process and reallocation of activities stands out, because during a pandemic it is evident that, many times, protocols are created only to meet the needs of the services, without evidence scientific or support from national and international health agencies, putting workers' health at risk.¹¹

The third dimension are resources for personal health, which refer to health services, information, opportunities, flexibility, and other supportive environments and incentives to efforts to improve or maintain a healthy lifestyle, as well as to monitor and support the physical and mental health of workers. Some ways to improve personal health resources in the workplace may include health services, information, training, financial support, facilities, support policies and programs that allow and encourage workers to adopt healthy lifestyle practices.¹⁵

As an attempt to reduce the consequences caused by the pandemic on the physical and mental health of Nursing professionals, specialists in mental health have been offering emotional support and guidelines for self-care¹¹, which is in line with the guidelines established in the third dimension of that WHO document.

Finally, the last dimension deals with the organization's participation in the community, encompassing activities, knowledge or resources that they can provide to support a community's physical and social well-being, including especially the factors that affect physical and mental health, safety and the well-being of workers and their families.¹⁵

Another important document published by PAHO/WHO in 2019, which presents specific global strategic guidelines for strengthening Nursing and Midwifery, can also be used as a reference for governments, health services, schools and Nursing associations to address working conditions and promote planning, as well as the regulation and administration of human resources, in order to guarantee the quantity, adequate distribution of Nursing personnel and to promote work environments with attractive and safe conditions.¹⁰

Despite the existence of these documents and studies carried out to date, focusing on aspects related to working conditions and the process of occupational illness, these seem to be insufficient to significantly raise the awareness of government officials and health service managers¹⁶ so that effective actions guarantee conditions adequate workplaces in healthy environments, in addition to the proper valuation of frontline workers, especially regarding pandemics.

What is perceived is that, despite the devaluation of Nursing professionals and the uncertain and fearful scenario determined by the Covid-19 pandemic, these workers have not changed the way of providing holistic and comprehensive care to users of health services. Such an approach to care is essential in facing the circumstances imposed by the growing demands for health care, especially in times of crisis, such as the one currently experienced.

In this perspective, Nursing teams from different health services, facing the Covid-19 pandemic, are using humanization strategies similar to those recommended by the Humanization Policy of the Unified Health System (*Sistema Único de Saúde - SUS*)¹⁷ and based on the concept of light technology. Light technology is characterized by social relationships at work, by producing bonds, by welcoming and by managing the health work process.¹⁸ Thus, several teams are creating “alternatives” that can further strengthen the affective dimension of care and the link between patients and Nursing professionals.

Some examples of humanization of care strategies used in the work process were published in journalistic media and social networks, such as workers who put their pictures on uniforms so that patients do not frighten with their clothes; smiley face masks are used to “cheer up” patients; family visits by electronic means to isolated patients; among other actions.

Thus, there is an urgent need to ensure, for Nursing, basic aspects related to the valorization of workers and their work, such as career plan, positions and salaries, bonds with social protection, spaces for discussion and negotiation of the health work, as well as training and continuing education.¹⁹

In the current situation and daring to project a better future, it is understood that healthy environments provide more security to the worker related to the physical environment; and promotes healthier behaviors, encouraging health and well-being, contributing to the satisfaction and appreciation of the worker, which also reflects in the patients’ satisfaction with the care provided.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This reflection showed that inadequate working conditions; absence of effective implementation of policies aimed at workers’ health, quality of life at work and promotion of healthy environments; low wages and devaluation of the profession represent important challenges for Nursing.

In this pandemic scenario, the paradoxes of the work process stand out, in which Nursing professionals are assisted in combating Covid-19, based on scientific knowledge, skills, humanized attitudes and ethical precepts, despite the aforementioned obstacles imposed on profession. For this reason, it is essential to sensitize health professionals, government officials and society to the importance of this profession for humanity, recognizing its value beyond this global crisis.

In this perspective, it must be recognized that qualified Nursing care and committed to the recovery of people’s health is crucial in facing Covid-19. However, issues related to adequate work conditions and the commitment to the quality of life of Nursing professionals cannot be neglected, even though the moment is one of calamity, which intensifies situations that have already happened and reveals the lack of prioritization of safety, health and well-being of health workers, and specifically of Nursing.

Therefore, starting from this global crisis, it is necessary to establish policies aimed at improving working conditions, investing in worker safety, in addition to promoting health and well-being in the workplace. These are factors that contribute to the professionals feel more satisfied, safe, and valued, reflecting in a care based on scientific knowledge and humanization principles provided with excellence and quality to the population.

It is added that, in order to transform this reality, it is urgent that Nursing professionals face the complex challenges they face in their daily lives, among which the need to conquer, on a personal and collective level, the valorization and recognition professional. To this end, unlike resignation, it is necessary to express indignation at this scenario that causes these workers to become ill.

It appears that, in order for Nursing to be the protagonist of its history and envision a promising future, in addition to a “commemorative year”, proactive leadership, managerial and political representation are required in order to strengthen the profession. This presupposes, among other factors, adequate staffing and remuneration that contribute so that workers do not become overworked and sick. Thus, we seek to progressively increase the visibility of this profession, which has demonstrated its capacity to take on courageous and competent Nursing care and the defense of life.

This reflection ends with expectations that the spotlight that lit up on Nursing will remain on after the pandemic, “illuminating” better working conditions, recognition, and appreciation for its professionals, translating into concrete measures for the present and the future.

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