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Complaints of Brazilian Nursing about exposure to occupational risks during the COVID-19 pandemic

ABSTRACT | Objective: To reflect on aspects related to the work of the Nursing team, during the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil. Methods: This is a reflection on some aspects of working conditions and the exposure to health risks of nursing professionals in Brazil, based on information from the Nursing Observatory and inspection reports from the Federal Nursing Council (COFEN), and the Nursing Profile Survey in Brazil. Results: Brazilian Nursing professionals have faced harsh working conditions, such as the insufficiency and inadequacy of the Equipment of Individual Protection (EIP) and the undersizing of teams, thereby increasing the risks to workers' health. Conclusions: The pandemic has exacerbated problems faced by nursing professionals, and the deficit in EIP with the undersizing of teams and work overload may be associated with the high number of deaths of professionals during the analyzed period.

Keywords: Nursing; Workforce; Health Unic System; Pandemic; COVID-19.

RESUMEN | Objetivo: Reflexionar sobre los aspectos relacionados al trabajo del equipo de Enfermería, durante la pandemia de COVID-19 en Brasil. Métodos: Se trata de una reflexión sobre algunos aspectos de las condiciones de trabajo y la exposición a los riesgos a la salud de los profesionales de Enfermería en Brasil, basada en las informaciones del Observatorio de Enfermería, los informes de fiscalización del Consejo Federal de Enfermería (COFEN), y de la Investigación Perfil de la Enfermería en Brasil. Resultados: Los profesionales de Enfermería brasileños han enfrentado duras condiciones de trabajo, como la insuficiencia y la inadecuación de los Equipos de Protección Individual (EPI) y el tamaño insuficiente de los equipos de Enfermería, aumentando con esto los riesgos a la salud de los trabajadores. Conclusiones: La pandemia exacerbó problemas enfrentados por los profesionales de Enfermería, y el déficit de EPI con el tamaño insuficiente de los equipos de Enfermería y la sobrecarga de trabajo pueden estar asociados al elevado número de óbitos de profesionales durante el período analizado.

Palabras claves: Enfermería; Fuerza de Trabajo; Sistema Único de Salud; Pandemia; COVID-19.

RESUMO | Objetivo: Refletir sobre os aspectos relacionados ao trabalho da equipe de Enfermagem, durante a pandemia da COVID-19 no Brasil. Métodos: Trata-se de uma reflexão sobre alguns aspectos das condições de trabalho e a exposição aos riscos à saúde dos profissionais de Enfermagem no Brasil, fundamentada nas informações do Observatório de Enfermagem e dos relatórios de fiscalização do Conselho Federal de Enfermagem (COFEN), e da Pesquisa Perfil da Enfermagem no Brasil. Resultados: Os profissionais de Enfermagem brasileiros tem enfrentado duras condições de trabalho, a exemplo da insuficiência e a inadequação dos Equipamentos de Proteção Individual (EPI) e o subdimensionamento das equipes, com isso aumentando os riscos à saúde dos trabalhadores. Conclusões: A pandemia exacerbou problemas enfrentados pelos profissionais de Enfermagem, e o déficit de EPI com o subdimensionamento das equipes e a sobrecarga de trabalho podem estar associados ao elevado número de óbitos de profissionais durante o período analisado.

Palavras-chaves: Enfermagem; Força de Trabalho; Sistema Único de Saúde; Pandemia; COVID-19.

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INTRODUCTION

Brazilian Nursing represents the largest contingent of workers in the macro-health sector, comprising 2.447.562 professionals, with 603.676 nurses, 1.413.425 technicians and 430.154 nursing assistants; ¹ constituting an important workforce of the Unified Health System (SUS) and of the private and supplementary care network. In SUS, the Nursing team works in different spaces of the Health Care Network (RAS), in Primary Health Care (PHC) services, medium and high complexity, playing an important role in identifying the health needs of the population as well as in the prevention of risks, injuries and illnesses and in the education and promotion of the health of families, subjects and communities.

However, despite the huge contingent and the great professional, political and technical representation, Brazilian Nursing experiences a reality of economic, social and labor vulnerability, due to the lack of a salary policy and the increase in outsourcing and the loss of rights and guarantees, fostered by neoliberal policies, in addition to precarious working conditions and illness. ²

According to the research Profile of Nursing in Brazil ³⁻⁵ Nursing professionals: work a lot and earn poorly; about 60% have monthly income, in current values, something related to six hundred dollars (three thousand reais); due to low salaries, many resort to multi-jobs to supplement their family income, including informal jobs outside the Health area; structural unemployment is a reality, in some states it reaches almost 20%; more than half of the contingent feels that their work is undervalued by the general population; 20% report having already suffered violence and aggression (physical, verbal or psychological) in the work environment; more than 60% report professional wear; around 10% reported having suffered an accident at work recently.

This situation was exposed with the arrival of the first cases of COVID-19 in the country, mainly due to the need to organize the health system, which was not prepared with the physical structure, equipment and supplies to accommodate the continuous and excessive demands of suspected and confirmed cases of the new coronavirus. The scarcity or difficulty in accessing quality Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), in addition to respirators, lung ventilators and Intensive Care Unit (ICU) beds has been a constant demand and a concern, due to the need for answers the population, especially those in need of critical care, as well as ensuring the protection of health workers.

With the spread of the new coronavirus, access to PPE by health professionals has become an important global concern, both for workers and for the population, in view of the possibility of interruption of care due to the illness of these professionals. Teams started to carry out assistance to the supposedly infected population, while waiting for the PPE; or else, those that were available did not meet the minimum security requirements. Because of this, health professionals began to express the fear and fear of contracting the disease and contaminating their families. ⁶

The failure to protect the health professionals they are exposed to have contributed to the spread of the disease, also from health services. ⁷ In addition to the demand for PPE, Nursing has faced "under-dimensioning of teams and maintenance of professionals who are members of the highest risk groups in the front line of care", ⁸ which has contributed to the illness of the workforce, especially those on the front line of fighting the pandemic. Given the above, this study aims to reflect on aspects related to the work of the Nursing team during the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil.

METHODS

A reflective study on aspects of working conditions and exposure to health risks of nursing professionals in Brazil, during the COVID-19 pandemic, based on contributions from the sociology of work, on information from the Nursing Observatory⁹ and on inspections in establishments all over Brazil carried out by the Federal Nursing Council System (COFEN)/Regional Nursing Councils.

DEVELOPMENT

Brazilian Nursing has historically played a strong role in health policies, with the achievement of actions and services, especially in remote locations, with vulnerable populations, in situations of calamity, disasters and epidemics. Such protagonism remains in the front line (front) of the COVID-19 pandemic, acting in the care, surveillance and monitoring of cases in different parts of the RAS.

Nursing professionals are engaged in responding to COVID-19, in clinical care, education/training, and in sharing information about public health and policies; they are essential for pandemic prevention and response efforts, providing first-line care, especially for complex cases that require hospitalization. They represent one of the most trusted groups of healthcare professionals, and should advocate for local, state and national policy responses to the COVID-19 outbreak. The engagement and protagonism of the Nursing workforce in the face of disease, whether in the development of care or control actions for its mitigation, place them as key actors for the end of the outbreak. ¹⁰ However, this engagement/entrenchment of Brazilian Nursing has increased the professionals' situation of vulnerability, leading them to fear, illness and death. Thousands of professionals have sought support from Cofen, through

complaints, in an attempt to resolve or at least alleviate the problems faced.

Inspection reports released by the COFEN System/Regional Nursing Councils point out the insufficiency of the provision of PPE and the under-dimensioning of the teams, as the biggest problems faced in the first months of the pandemic. On-site inspections and the situational survey carried out by the Regional Nursing Councils in 5.780 health institutions signaled the high rate of contagion in the category, at the beginning of the pandemic. Consolidated data on April 24, 2020, with inspections covering 27% of those enrolled – including situational surveys by telephone and on-site inspections, indicated that 4,602 professionals had been dismissed on suspicion of COVID-19. The Nursing Observatory recorded, at the time, 49 deaths from the disease. 4.598 complaints were received, most of them validated by the inspection, which identified inadequacies in the provision of PPE and a deficit of 13.790 professionals to work in the sectors serving COVID-19.^{9,11}

A report released on July 17, 2020, points out that the Nursing Councils received 9.037 complaints, with 8.075 (89%) being investigated, most of them referring to the scarcity, insufficiency or inadequacy of PPE and deficit of nursing professionals to deal with the cases of COVID-19. Until the 24th of July, 17.569 health units were inspected throughout Brazil; of these, 5.331 were inspected on the spot; 12.238 were approached by phone and email; 69% of these are public; 33% are registered as a reference unit to serve COVID-19. Among these institutions, 4.089 did not have a contingency plan to replace nursing professionals who presented symptoms of COVID-19; 1.685 did not implement protection measures aimed at professionals who are part of the risk group; 24.667 present a real deficit of professionals (8.670 nurses and 15.997 nursing te-

chnicians/auxiliaries) and 75 workers working without registration in the Nursing Council (illegal exercise).¹¹

Additional data from the Newsletter of the Professional Practice Inspection Department (DFEP/ COFEN)¹² allow a broader understanding of the scenario. In a contingent of professionals, only 70.533 had been tested for COVID-19; 39.988 were dismissed for presenting symptoms of the disease. Of the 29.204 cases confirmed by Cofen, 306 died, making a fatality rate of 2,06%.^{9,12}

As for the qualification and/or continuing education of professionals, 1,483 health institutions had not trained their teams to handle cases of COVID-19 and 1,205 had not trained nursing professionals in the proper use and disposal of PPE in COVID-19 units. The “absence of training for the Nursing team related to COVID-19 shows a potential weakening of the quality of nursing care provided, as well as the protection of professionals and patients from contamination by the new coronavirus in these institutions”.¹²

As for the situation of PPE in health units that treat cases of COVID-19, the document pointed out significant deficits: 1.935 have a deficiency in surgical masks; 2647 of mask N95/PFF2; 1.784 eye protection; 1.377 of gloves; 2.548 of coats/aprons; 3.409 of caps. Some of these units have unavailability of elementary items, including hand washing sinks in the sectors (559); liquid soap (362); paper towels (488); and 70% alcohol (296).¹²

The exposure of workers intensively, without adequate protection, has become an important issue, widely commented on by the international press and with a great emotional charge. Appropriate use of PPE significantly reduces the risk of viral transmission during customer service, whether through contact, droplets or in the air in the workplace.¹³

The advance of COVID-19 cases in nursing professionals who work on the

front line of services meeting pandemic demands, deaths due to the disease, implications for workers' health, such as stress, work overload, difficult access and lack of adequate and high-quality PPE, fear of contracting it or transmitting it to family members, have led many professionals to develop a mental disorder.

In April, the International Council of Nurses (ICN) announced 12 top priorities for combating the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide, especially for the nursing workforce, which works in countries with a high burden of the disease. Among them, we highlight the need to “Urgently prioritize immediate access, sufficient amounts of high-quality and appropriate PPE for nurses and other health professionals”, “Ensure the protection and financial remuneration of nurses” and “Demonstrate public support and recognize the value of nurses to society”.¹⁴

During the 8th “Triad Meeting” (World Health Organization - WHO, ICN and the International Confederation of Midwives - ICM), which brought together more than 600 heads of government, nurses and midwives, leaders and representatives of National Nursing Associations of 145 countries, it was highlighted that “nurses and midwives put their lives at risk to respond to the pandemic and provide essential health services”. The Triad Summit focused “on how nurses and midwives can be protected, their leadership maintained and supported, and their contributions to emergency response, universal health coverage and more health and well-being maximized now and in the future.”¹⁵

Despite the diverse and adverse working conditions, nursing professionals in Brazil, in a pandemic period, fulfill important responsibilities¹⁶ and they exercise important leadership, from the active search for respiratory symptoms in the territories where the teams of the Family Health Strategy

(FHS)/ PHC work, in the vaccination of the population against COVID-19, to more specialized care in the ICU.

However, we understand that the premises advocated by the International Labor Organization (ILO) in combating precarious work - defined as that with an unprotected employment contract with legal protection, have never been so current and contemporary in this globalized world, especially in this period of the COVID-19 pandemic, which reveals the precariousness of nursing work in its various dimensions.¹⁷ We can say that Nursing comes to fight the pandemic in unfavorable conditions and with a less than encouraging scenario in terms of work management.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has placed on the daily agenda of the Brazilian and world press the importance of nursing professionals, difficulties faced and demands related to working conditions, in the period analyzed there was a significant increase in biological risks and work overload.

The scarcity and inadequacy of PPE was the main point reported by the professionals to the respective Regional Councils, followed by the underdimensioning of the teams. A chronic problem, the underestimation was aggravated by the increased demand for health services in the pandemic and by the removal of professionals affected by COVID-19. The

inspection also found the insufficiency of other biosafety measures, such as testing and screening for the disease. Often, not even professionals on leave under suspicion of COVID-19 were tested.

The high number of complaints indicates an accentuated perception of risk on the part of nursing professionals, even at the beginning of the pandemic, corroborated by data verified by the inspection teams and by the evolution of the contagion itself. At the end of July, the number of deaths of nursing professionals in Brazil corresponded to 30% of the total recorded by the ICN. Deficit in PPE and work overload is associated with the high number of deaths among Brazilian nursing professionals in the period analyzed. 🇧🇷

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