

Editorial

Nursing and COVID-19: giving recognition to the profession in times of adversity

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The year 2020 is recognized as the international Year of the Nurse and Midwife, according to the declaration of the 72nd World Health Organization Assembly, celebrated in Geneva, Switzerland in 2019. There, Ghebreyesus (1) asserted that the work of nursing professionals is invaluable for the health of people around the world, and he exalted the work done by close to twenty million nursing professionals in order to fulfill the sustainable development and universal healthcare objectives. For their part, the International Council of Nurses and the Nursing Now campaign initiated a global movement to improve the conditions in which nursing professionals work and give care, promoting better working conditions and more social recognition for the profession. Furthermore, the Nightingale Challenge 2020 has the purpose of helping the development of the next generation of nurses as leaders, professionals and defenders of health, and show that nursing is an exciting and gratifying profession.

According to World Health Organization (WHO) data (2), nurses represent almost 50% of the health labor force. Of the 43.5 million health workers in the world, it is estimated that 27.9 million are nurses, of which the majority -- 19.3 million -- are professional nurses; nonetheless, 50% of member states of the WHO report having less than three nursing professionals per 1,000 inhabitants. This ratio has been included as a development indicator by the World Bank, which recognizes countries like Iceland, New Zealand, and in our region, Brazil as those countries with the best nursing per population ratio, signaling the need for urgent improvement in this ratio in a large part of the planet (3). The global strategy on human resources for healthcare, Workforce 2030, has initiated an information campaign with strategies to favor an increase in the number of nurses, making their social recognition a priority (2).

Concurrent with the global Year of the Nurse and Midwife, the infection by SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) which produces an acute, grave respiratory system syndrome has caused a global crisis without precedent that has exposed the fragility of health systems (4). According to data by the COVID-19 panel at the center for Systems Science and Engineering at the University of John Hopkins, by April 15, 2020 this illness will have caused a total of 120,863 deaths and more than 1,935,646 confirmed cases around the world (5), generating, at the same time, devastating economic and social effects which have produced the necessity of adapting special social and health conditions in more than 185 countries to contain the effects of the pandemic and combat the international sanitary crisis. In this process, health professionals have been protagonists and the social status of nurses and their work during times of vulnerability has been reconfigured, bringing to light the capacities of the profession and their potential during international sanitary emergencies.

Nursing in the face of the current COVID-19 situation

Almost 130 years ago, the professor Lystra Gretter, in the Harper hospital in Detroit Michigan, wrote "The Nightingale Pledge", which was inspired by the work of Florence Nightingale in the assistance of wounded during the Crimean war, and which is currently used to reaffirm the commitment of future nurses to their profession. The text of the pledge commits future nurses to dedicate their abilities to the service of their fellow humans, doing everything possible to elevate the level of nursing (6). The current global crisis imposes on every professional a rethinking of the deontological fundamentals demanded by their profession and reaffirms what was proposed by Gretter in said pledge: even when the conditions for giving care are adverse, nurses have been at the vanguard for solutions. This has been exemplified during the COVID-19 crisis.

The large number of affected people and the long work hours needed from nurses, exposes them to risks related to their labor in different services. Nursing care demands close contact with sick patients, which involves biological risks and the possibility of infection, but also a large emotional toll from participating in complex environments and in critical situations with patients and families. Recent studies elaborated in countries with high rate of contagion, like China, revealed that the nurses are exposed to stress, whether the principal factors that increase their stress are care of children, work hours per week, or anxiety (7); nonetheless, they will continue to offer care, which shows a particular ethos, the commitment of the professionals, and the professionalism towards care of human life.

During World Health Day 2020 (8) the United Nations secretary-general Antonio Guterres highlighted the alarming situations in which people affected with the new virus are attended, with personal protection gear being absent in the majority of countries, combined with excessive workload without precedent, despite which nurses have remained in the different spheres of attention, leading processes for health care, planning, and designing strategies for public health and the administration of sanitation and investigation. This situation appears to have a connection with the establishments of the Nightingale Challenge 2020, and should be a call to action for constructing new and better scenarios for the profession. Howard Catton, general director of the International Council of Nurses, has stated that the nursing response to the pandemic should serve as a guide for modeling future sanitary policies around the globe that place nurses at the forefront (9).

Hospital and the intensive care units have been places of special importance during the crisis, however other care locations should be valued for their capacity to mitigate human suffering. Health systems are establishing ethical guidelines, prioritizing the assignation of scarce resources (for example, mechanical ventilators), while nurses continue to care for the most vulnerable population, like the elderly and those with chronic illness, who have high possibilities of not having access to specialized care. This situation shows the transversal demands of the professionals in nursing and of the health and social protection system, being able to take care of the most critical patients with the best available technology, as well as patients who were offered palliative care as a form of dignifying their existence. Retirement homes, primary attention services, extramural programs, and high-vulnerability population centers, like jails, can assist their members, at least in countries with the best levels of development, with nurses capable of efficiency and autonomous problem solving. The speed with which health systems were able to reorganize in order to face the epidemic has shown nursing program's capacity for leadership and for solving the sanitary needs of multiple

population groups, a capacity which should factor in while determining professional competency, especially in countries that don't have advanced policies of nursing practice.

The social recognition of nurses: present and future

Gratitude towards nursing professionals and other members of the health team is a common, collective value during pandemics. Mona Juul, President of the Economic and Social Council of the UN (8), praised the work of this group of professionals and asked for gratitude toward the effort that they do for reducing the impact of sanitation emergencies in the lives of people. Around the planet, people performed actions of gratitude that constitute a symbolic act toward the profession, and these actions should be accompanied by institutional efforts to improve the quality of life of nursing professionals. Improved salary, access to higher learning programs, better working conditions, and professional incentives should be developed as part of an action plan that recognizes the role of nursing in the health system.

The availability of human resources in nursing could be dramatically reduced in the coming years. Confronted by this possible scenario, the International Nursing Council (9) has motivated different states to design policies to attract a new generation of professionals, which has a thin relationship with the social recognition of the profession. A year designated by the UN and the social consequences of a pandemic are factors that can generate short-term effects in favor or against future crisis, but concrete actions should be taken to develop changes that improve the conditions of practicing professionals. The current COVID-19 crisis, Influenza A (H1N1) of 2009, The SARS epidemic of 2003, as well as the Ebola and Aids emergency, have motivated international recognition for the nursing profession and have led to structuring of concrete initiatives and actions that will allow the closing of social gaps in the profession in the future years.

Despite the adverse circumstances generated by COVID-19, the year 2020 should leave as a legacy a common purpose: to elevate the profile and status of nursing in all the world and close the gaps described in the Triple Impact Report (10). The role of education and investigation will be fundamental to support, report, and monitor the different initiatives that come from these processes, as well as the formation of future nurses. All nursing professionals should assume an essential task for the discipline after the international sanitary crisis: to consolidate the social recognition of the profession.

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