

*PERFORMANCE OF FORENSIC NURSING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF
UNDERGRADUATE NURSING STUDENTS*

**ATUAÇÃO DA ENFERMAGEM FORENSE SOB A ÓPTICA DE ESTUDANTES DE
GRADUAÇÃO EM ENFERMAGEM**

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ABSTRACT

Objective: to analyze the view of nursing students about the role of Forensic Nursing. **Method:** qualitative, descriptive and exploratory study, conducted with 10 nursing students from a private university in northern region of Brazil. A semi-structured interview was used, through the adaptation of the instrument called: Questionnaire of Knowledge on Forensic Nursing Practices. To categorize the statements, Content Analysis was used. **Results:** participants identified forensic nursing through some skills and competencies, as well as their field of work, assistance to forensic patients and institutional protocols. **Conclusion:** it was possible to understand how nursing students related forensic nursing as a field of action, bringing limitations of knowledge related to the concept of the specialty and the specificities of performance, with an emphasis on approaching and caring for people in situations of violence and technical procedures in the management of traces.

Keyword: Forensic Nursing; Nursing students; Violence; College education.

RESUMO

Objetivo: analisar a visão de estudantes do curso de enfermagem acerca da atuação da Enfermagem Forense. **Método:** estudo qualitativo, descritivo e exploratório, realizado com 10 estudantes de enfermagem de uma universidade privada da região norte do Brasil. Foi utilizada uma entrevista semiestruturada, por meio da adaptação do instrumento denominado: Questionário de Conhecimentos sobre Práticas de Enfermagem Forense. Para categorização das falas utilizou-se a Análise de Conteúdo. **Resultados:** os participantes identificaram a enfermagem forense por meio de algumas habilidades e competências, bem como seu campo de atuação, assistência à pacientes forenses e protocolos institucionais. **Conclusão:** foi possível compreender como os estudantes de enfermagem relacionaram a enfermagem forense como campo de atuação, trazendo limitações do conhecimento relacionados ao conceito da especialidade e as especificidades de atuação, com ênfase na abordagem e cuidado às pessoas em situação de violência e os procedimentos técnicos no manejo de vestígios.

Palavras-chave: Enfermagem Forense; Estudantes de Enfermagem; Violência; Educação Superior.

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INTRODUCTION

Forensic Nursing (FN) is defined as the application of scientific and technical knowledge in the nursing area to clinical situations considered forensic, presupposing the intersection between the health system and the legal system, in which it provides direct care to victims, offenders and all who witness situations of violence⁽¹⁻²⁾.

In Brazil, FN has been recognized as a specialty since 2011⁽³⁾. In 2017⁽⁴⁾, the Federal Nursing Council (COFEN) approved the resolution of the forensic nurse's action, which bases the response to health problems arising from trauma and/or any form of violence, such as the identification, collection and preservation of forensic traces, treatment of cases of Intimate Partner Violence, ill-treatment, sexual abuse and neglect of children and the elderly, sexual assault, investigation of death and care of incarcerated people.

The World Health Organization emphasizes the responsibility of the competent institutions when talking about violence, as it constitutes a serious public health problem, which requires the participation of health professionals, including nurses, because they play an essential role in the prevention and restoration of the population's health⁽¹⁻⁵⁾. The current scenario of violence in Brazil has increased due to the causes of death, which are external and natural, in which the main victims are

children, young people and elderly males and women⁽⁶⁾.

In this context, a reality is experienced that is far from ideal, because nurses have experience in providing care from a physical and psychological perspective of the patient, but most are not prepared to identify and care for people in situations of violence and accurately determine what evidence should be collected and preserved according to forensic principles⁽⁷⁾.

In this case, it is necessary to discuss about FN in the academic sphere, considering that nurses live with the problem daily in health services, it is understood that nursing needs to have knowledge about the theme under study and establish in its work process the careful dimension from the perspective of individual and collective care, seeking to respond to the challenges of better understanding the process of violence and to train competent and socially committed professionals in coping⁽¹⁾.

Therefore, to conduct the research, the following question was asked: how do nursing students see FN and its fields of activity? Therefore, the aim of this study was to analyze the view of nursing students about Forensic Nursing.

METHOD

This is a descriptive-exploratory study, with a qualitative approach, conducted with finalist students of the undergraduate

nursing course of a private Higher Education Institution (HEI) in Manaus, Amazonas. The inclusion criteria were students duly enrolled in the 10th period, since they were in the condition of finalists of the course and theoretically went through all semesters, being individuals able to answer the questions of the object of study. Those of exclusion were those removed from the university by locking enrollment, students in the curricular internship period, and those who were working at the time of data collection.

The instrument used was the Knowledge Questionnaire on Forensic Nursing Practices (KQFNP), of European origin⁽⁷⁾ and the translated and validated version for Brazilian culture⁽⁸⁾, which consists of sociodemographic, academic and training questions in PE, which included 74 dichotomous statements (true or false) and aims to evaluate the knowledge of the concept of PE; forensic situations; forensic traces; communication and documentation of evidence and care in the preservation of traces.

Therefore, the authors who elaborated, translated and validated the KQFNP, authorized the researchers of this study to adapt it to a qualitative approach, through the categorization of the set of items of the instrument by open questions in semi-structured interview format, which were conducted between February and March 2020. These occurred in a closed room of the

course coordination, with the very clops or external noises that could hinder the understanding of the researcher and the participants, using a digital recorder to later assist in the transcription of the discourses.

Content Analysis⁽⁹⁾ was used for the categorization of the statements, being divided into three stages. The first was understood in the transcription of the statements and organization of the initial ideas, in which it occurred to the floating reading as a way of approximation of the researcher with the analyzed sources. Then, the material was explored consisting of the systematic implementation of the information collected and execution of the representative clippings of the discourses. Finally, the results obtained were treated and interpreted categorically.

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee under Opinion n° 3,372,745/2019, following Resolution n° 466/2012 of the National Health Council in which participants signed the Free and Informed Consent Form, which reserved the anonymity of the participants, replacing their names with: AL1, AL2, AL3, so on.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before analyzing the results and discussing them, the sociodemographic characteristics of the study subjects were traced. Of the ten students, eight were female and two males, with a mean age of 27 years,

born in the municipalities of Manaus-AM (5), Nhamunda-AM (1), Autazes-AM (1), Barreirinha-AM (1), Boa Vista-RR (1) and Obidos-PA (1), located in the Northern region of Brazil.

From the proposed category: Concept and performance of Forensic Nursing, subcategories were listed that allowed the understanding through students' speech of professional practice related to the identification, collection and preservation of traces, as well as ethical conduct and documentation in the care of forensic patients.

Concept and performance of Forensic Nursing in the view of nursing undergraduates

Regarding the concept of FN, it was observed that the participants consider an area that studies the criminal and investigative part, involving issues in the study of murders, accidents, assistance to victims of violence, correlating nursing and the Legal Medical Institute (LMI) and participation together with the police.

It studies criminal part that nurses can act on and specific cases too, 'right!?!'. (AL 1)

It is the question of the investigative role of nursing, about what nursing can do in the field of criminal investigation, for example, murders, accidents, the issue of walking with nursing in the IML, participating together

with the police, playing a more investigative role. (AL 2)

My knowledge is not so broad, but forensics covers areas involving the issue of deaths. (AL 3)

I think you're responsible for helping victims of violence. (AL 7)

Although the students recognize some important points of the specialty, such as the assistance to people in situations of violence and the contribution in the investigative process, the reports demonstrate a reductionist view on FN, in which the subjects showed limited knowledge about the concept.

To differentiate FN from other specialties of the profession, it is necessary to understand that it is interconnected with nursing science and forensic practice, to promote direct care to victims, perpetrators and family members⁽²⁾. It is a nursing specialty with subspecialties that focus on forensic clinical practice, providing care to living and deceased patients at the legal and clinical interface⁽¹⁾. Likewise, it can be defined as a clinical practice in the care of people in situations of violence, in an investigative and criminal approach, in which the nurse will provide their care to these victims⁽⁷⁾.

Regarding the domains and fields of activity of FN, the participants cited areas and disciplines such as expertise, necropsy, autopsy, mental health, collective health and

major disasters, such as nurses' actions in forensic situations.

Nursing practice in mental health, collective health. (AL 4)

It can help in the investigation of the cause of death in the autopsy process and prepare the body for examination. (AL 5)

Forensics itself is part of forensic nursing. (AL 9)

Act in the great disasters. (AL 10)

The participants mention FN in a comprehensive way, through the interdisciplinarity of the mentioned areas, which tend not to distinguish the performance of each professional in the work dynamics, especially when it comes to FN, because it is relatively a new specialty in nursing.

In the mental health practice, cited by AL4, there is the domain Forensic Psychiatric Nursing, which develops care to people deprived of liberty or in legal custody, in an interdisciplinary approach in decision-making with the judicial system. It also develops its clinical practice to victims to assist them in the restoration of mental health and social reintegration, providing care within the penitentiary system⁽¹⁰⁻¹¹⁾.

In the process of Investigation of Death, being violent (suicide, homicide and accident) or natural (disease), the forensic nurse provides biopsychosocial assistance to

survivors and bereaved family members at any stage of the life cycle. It is emphasized that in the *postmortem*, the performance of the necropsy/autopsy examination can be assisted by a nurse with expertise in the area⁽¹²⁾.

Major disasters or mass disasters, mentioned as one of the fields of action of FN, is one of the domains in which forensic nurses establish human responses to the life processes of people in a disaster scenario, whether of natural cause or human intervention⁽⁴⁾. The phenomenon of violence is related to catastrophic episodes, in which the nursing team in general needs to be prepared to provide care for these cases involving multiple victims⁽¹³⁾.

In one of the statements of the research participants, it was mentioned that FN is related to the expert performance, and it is important to highlight that they are distinct attributions that complement each other in the work process. The service of experts begins at the scene of the crime with the recognition of traces and materials, proceeds with the analysis and evaluation of the results obtained in the laboratory and presentation of their findings in court⁽¹⁴⁾. It is necessary to emphasize that nurses, whether forensic or not, can become a judicial expert, being an aid for justice in investigative processes, such as in the provision of statements⁽⁴⁾.

To deepen the students' view of the performance of FN in specific cases, the two subcategories listed are followed:

Identification, collection and preservation of forensic traces; e, Ethics and documentation in the care of forensic patients.

- Identification, collection and preservation of forensic traces

In this first subcategory, the participants reported that forensic traces are interconnected from a criminal perspective, in which the specialist professional will assist in this investigative process. Also, in relation to the traces, there was a vast limitation of students' knowledge about these contents related to forensic practice.

The remains would be the remains of a crime, so I have no idea how to proceed, but I hear a lot in the paper. (AL 1)

It's all that's related to the investigation of the death, such as fingerprints, hair, clothing, blood, everything the person could leave at the time of the crime. (AL 2)

I don't know the technical procedures, but I do know that they are materials used to understand what death was like, to study both in person and in the matter of the environment, as was the murder. (AL 3)

I don't know anything about traces. (AL 4)

I have no detailed knowledge of the cause, but they are resources to analyze a crime of sexual assault, for example. (AL 6)

I know that it is a short period to analyze the clues, what is left precisely to enrich the work of expertise, such as fingerprints, the brand of tennis, the impression that remained on the knife, hair, button, everything that refers to the moment of the crime. (AL 9)

The traces are of paramount importance in any criminal investigation because they contribute to the resolution of judicial cases, by simultaneously relating the crime scene, the victim and the offender. They can be signs, traces, spots or objects that are left by an individual suspected of a crime, allowing the scientific police services to investigate the evidence that can prove the crime and its authorship⁽¹⁵⁾.

There are three classifications for forensic traces, which are lofoscopic, biological and physicochemical. Lofoscopic scans refer to fingerprints, palm and plantar prints. Biologicals are all that related to blood, semen, saliva, hair, bones, teeth, hair, placenta, DNA and vaginal secretions. Physical chemicals are footprints, tire tracks, projectiles, mum, firearms, sharp and piercing objects or instruments⁽¹⁶⁾.

About the care of people in situations of violence, the Emergency and Emergency Service is the main gateway for these victims, in which nurses are the first responsible for the preparation of screening, implementation and organization of clinical care and

treatment of users of these services. Due to this great demand, many end up disregarding important traces, such as clothing and accessories, which could later help in the elucidation of cases of violent death, which among the most frequent are traffic accidents and attempted homicides⁽¹³⁻¹⁵⁾.

When collecting and preserving traces in cases of physical and sexual violence, all inner and outer garments should be carefully removed and packed separately in bags or paper packages, never in plastic containers. The nurse must collect each item as soon as the victim undress, then, proceeding to its packaging, to avoid the cross-contamination of physical evidence, and then the sheet of paper should be folded, which can be analyzed at the laboratory level⁽¹⁻⁷⁾.

Due to the complexity in these cases and in other forms of violence, it is imperative that nursing students still in graduation know the techniques of identification, collection and preservation of traces, because health services that demand situations at this level need nurses to be prepared in a technical-scientific practice detailed in comprehensive and qualified care, according to forensic principles.

For professionals who already work, the search for knowledge is necessary in this aspect to apply it in their care practice. The ignorance in these cases later impairs the work of medical-legal expertise, and the nurse is the professional who could become a

mediator between the patient and justice, because his more attentive and shrewder look at the physical and behavioral signs effectively contribute to the punishment of the aggressor and the cessation of violence⁽¹⁴⁾.

- Ethics and documentation in the care of forensic patients

In this subcategory, the students highlighted confidentiality, emotional control, humanization, multidisciplinary work and referral to specialized services, such as care provided to people in forensic situations, especially in cases of sexual violence. In addition, they emphasized the importance of nursing registration as a support.

Professionals need to be ethical and responsible, document everything to be supported. (AL 1)

It must be secretive and involve us as emotionally as possible. (AL 2)

I think there are protocols to care for victims of violence, especially sexual violence, so specialized professionals must know these documentations, and the institution's own POP may have detailed information of conduct. (AL 5)

I would welcome and later notify other professionals who would contribute to the service. (AL 7)

I think it is necessary to correctly exercise this issue of legislation and documentation, especially for the hierarchical part of the institution in which this

professional works. (AL 9)

You need to talk to the patient to know the situation. Trigger social services, and the police if possible. (AL 10)

In the care of forensic patients, a few issues need to be considered, including the way in which nurses will approach the individual, because most of the time, this approach is multidisciplinary and requires that other professionals assist not only in treatment and recovery, but in emotional, social and economic issues, for the person to avoid the process of revictimization and bring even greater traumas to it⁽¹⁷⁾.

Some municipalities, states and institutions have specific protocols for people in situations of violence that must be followed, as it is a document that can be fundamental in solving some cases. When this occurs, the forensic nurse is asked to testify in court, in which he will present in detail all the files and documents related to the examinations and care provided to the victim, since some processes may take years to reach the stage of professional testimony².

In this context, there is the chain of custody, which acts as a guarantee at the judicial level that the trace collected is the same as that collected at the crime scene, being the official evidence. The result of this procedure is visible in documents or forms prepared for this proper purpose, in which it identifies the traces that were collected on a

given date (creating a history of the route), as well as allows to identify all the individuals who handled them (since they were collected, until the time they were presented in court)⁽¹⁹⁾.

Through the participants' statements, it is essential to train and train health professionals, especially nurses, because they are the first to have direct contact with victims of violence. Thus, it is necessary to invest in continuing education in ethical-legal issues, institutional protocols, technical procedures related to forensic traces and the chain of custody in the Unified Health System (SUS), to improve the quality provided in health services.

Thus, the limitations in professional qualification to work with victims still occur due to an incipient approach at the undergraduate, graduate and health services levels, both in the theoretical and practical aspects. Therefore, it is necessary to carry out extension projects and/or research in line with the services that provide these services⁽¹⁷⁾.

FINAL NOTES

It was possible to understand how nursing students related forensic nursing as a field of action, bringing limitations of knowledge related to the concept of the specialty and the specificities of its professional practice, with emphasis on the approach and care of people in situations of violence and technical procedures in the

management of traces.

Therefore, the emerging need for the theme to be addressed in undergraduate nursing courses is emphasized. Including it as an isolated discipline in the curriculum matrix, being elective or mandatory, would require specialist teachers in the area, which in Brazil are few. As a result, it is suggested a reformulation in the menus of disciplines that involve contents of violence in a transversal way.

One of the limitations of the study was the recruitment of the subjects participating in the research, because they were fulfilling a mandatory curricular internship, in which there were difficulties to find them available in the institution.

Because it is an extremely practical specialty, it is essential that further studies can be developed addressing the area to students, because the union of evidence will be fundamental for a future change in the Pedagogical Projects of undergraduate nursing courses.

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