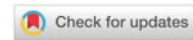


THE EVOLUTION OF NURSING AS A PROFESSION IN HEALTHCARE

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Abstract: Currently, nursing stands as a highly coveted profession drawing significant attention. While its roots can be traced back to ancient times, the formal recognition of nursing as a profession, labeled as such, has only emerged in recent decades. Defined as both a science and an art grounded in evidence, nursing is progressively assuming more significant roles within the healthcare and biomedical realms.

The profession's evolution is intricately linked with advancements in science, technology, and research, which have translated into tangible practices within the healthcare system. Offering both undergraduate and graduate nursing programs elevates the level of responsibility among nurses. However, this advancement lacks proper systematization and acknowledgment of educational standards within the healthcare sector.

Future challenges encompass meeting the increasing healthcare demands spurred by longer life expectancies and population growth, alongside facilitating professional mobility within EU nations. Factors such as enhanced financial stability and improved working conditions contribute to the outflow of nurses from the region. Proposed solutions include establishing adaptable mobile teams, prioritizing patient education and preventative measures, integrating LED clinics/facilities, and introducing supportive robotic technologies. Nurses play a pivotal role in delivering care and advocating for health equity, emphasizing the necessity of fostering collaborative partnerships for the future sustainability of healthcare systems.

Keywords: nursing, autonomy, healthcare system, public health, professional identity

Field: Medical Sciences

1. AUTONOMY IN THE NURSING PROFESSION: PATH TO PROFESSIONAL INDEPENDENCE IN HEALTHCARE SYSTEMS

Bearing in mind the general importance of caring for the health of the population, it is clear that the health care system represents one of the most complex systems of a country in the organizational sense, with elements that, through efficient functioning, should ensure physically, geographically and economically accessible, integrated and high-quality health care. Historically, nursing as a profession went through a series of development phases, always striving to respond to the challenges of the profession and follow contemporary trends and needs of society. By defining nursing as an integral and independent profession within the health care system, a whole series of professional, educational and social challenges is set before the modern nurse, especially in those countries where the nursing profession still has an inadequate social image, both in the public and professional circles. The change in the role of nurses in the reformed European and North American health systems is particularly visible in primary health care and public health, where nurses have assumed one of the leading roles in the organization of the work system. With a unique professional focus that can be directed at the individual and the family, or the system and the community at the same time, modern nursing, as a health profession, is extremely favorably positioned to respond to the need of modern society for the integration of health services, and at the same time make an active contribution to positive changes in the organization of the modern health care system

Considering the paramount importance of safeguarding public health, it becomes evident that a nation's healthcare system is among its most intricate organizational structures. Its components, when efficiently functioning, should ensure accessibility, integration, and high-quality healthcare on physical, geographical, and economic levels. Nursing, as a profession, has traversed various developmental phases throughout history, continually adapting to meet evolving challenges and societal needs. By establishing nursing as an essential and autonomous profession within the healthcare framework, a plethora of professional, educational, and social hurdles confront modern nurses, particularly in regions where the profession still suffers from an inadequate societal perception. The shifting role of nurses within reformed European and North American healthcare systems is notably evident in primary healthcare and public health domains, where nurses have assumed prominent positions in organizational structures.

With a distinctive professional focus capable of addressing individual, familial, systemic, and communal needs concurrently, modern nursing occupies a uniquely advantageous position in meeting

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contemporary society's demand for integrated healthcare services. Furthermore, it actively contributes to fostering positive transformations within modern healthcare organizational structures (Živanović, 2021).

The principle of autonomy entails recognizing and honoring the decision-making capacity of individuals or professionals within their respective domains. Despite this, nursing is often perceived as a supportive adjunct to medicine, with the term "nurse" itself contributing to this notion of dependency. Although nurses undergo rigorous education and training as mandated by their country's laws, and successfully pass requisite exams for registration and independent healthcare practice, they currently lack substantial support from influential stakeholders. Consequently, their contributions are often undervalued, and they may not assert themselves adequately within the healthcare system, a dynamic that is acknowledged across various entities within the sector (Peličić, 2020).

The role of a nurse within healthcare is one of independence and responsibility. Autonomy, in this context, entails respecting personal values, fundamental human rights, and the capacity for self-determination encompassing concepts such as beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice. It is our ethical obligation to act for the greater good, ensuring equitable distribution of rights and responsibilities, maintaining a balance between good and harm, and treating all individuals impartially. Upholding moral and legal standards is imperative, with repercussions for disobedience.

Essential components of nursing autonomy include truthfulness with patients, respect for their privacy, safeguarding confidential information, and obtaining consent for interventions. Nursing autonomy is characterized by the ability and right to make independent decisions and take action within one's professional scope, while engaging in interactive relationships with patients and other healthcare professionals, respecting their autonomy and integrity. Central to nursing autonomy is the provision of care for both sick and healthy individuals.

However, the concept of nursing autonomy remains contentious, subject to diverse interpretations, understandings, and acceptance. Nurses themselves often perceive autonomy with a sense of apprehension, fearing professional assimilation or obsolescence, leading to a tendency towards professional monoperspectivism or reductionism.

The issue of professional autonomy in nursing lies in the disparity between professional aspirations and the prevailing perception of the profession. While the ideal of nursing is characterized by professional autonomy, the current reality often places nurses in subordinate positions. They contend with a multitude of regulations, unpredictable workloads that jeopardize their well-being, organizational disarray, and sometimes, the condescension of colleagues.

Under such circumstances, nurses find it challenging to meet their professional expectations, as the prevailing reality contradicts the profession's aspirations for self-fulfillment. It can be reasonably asserted that nurses worldwide lack autonomy, and substantial changes in the delicate dynamics between healthcare professions could only be achieved through comprehensive health system reforms.

A significant issue within the nursing profession is the discord between professional expectations and public perception. Studies indicate that the public often perceives nurses as inadequately educated, lacking intelligence, and hesitant to assume responsibility—traits that are incongruent with the notion of professional status. Occasionally, despite recognizing their distinct role, the public exploits this perceived "intellectual and educational deficit" when determining how to interact with nurses, perpetuating traditional stereotypes and neglecting their genuine healthcare needs (Marinić, 2016).

2. NURSING'S ROLE IN PATIENT HEALTH PROTECTION: NAVIGATING HEALTHCARE SYSTEMS TOWARD INTEGRATION AND QUALITY CARE

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines the healthcare system as a foundational infrastructure aimed at implementing various programs and services to provide healthcare to individuals, families, and communities. Given the overarching importance of safeguarding population health, the healthcare system stands as one of a nation's most intricate organizational structures. Its components are designed to function cohesively, striving to achieve the overarching objective of delivering accessible, integrated, and high-quality healthcare, regardless of physical, geographical, or economic barriers.

Today, the quality of healthcare services provided is recognized as a paramount characteristic of modern healthcare systems. In the region, healthcare is delivered across primary, secondary (intermediate), and tertiary (central) levels, interconnected within a unified system wherein higher levels of care consistently support lower levels. Embracing a multidisciplinary approach is imperative for the advancement of modern integrated healthcare, encompassing all facets of health—whether individual or communal. This approach necessitates an interprofessional and collaborative effort among healthcare and other professionals in preventing health issues and addressing pressing healthcare concerns (Prlić,

N., 2020).

Over the past decade, healthcare systems worldwide have embarked on various reorganization and transformation processes aimed at improving the delivery of healthcare to the population and restructuring organizational frameworks. Regardless of the specific initiatives undertaken, the overarching objective of these reforms is typically centered on establishing an integrated healthcare system that is fully aligned with the present and future health needs of healthcare users. The integration of healthcare facilitates significant cost rationalization, along with more effective planning and organization of health policies, ultimately resulting in enhanced quality of healthcare services and improved quality of life for those covered by health insurance.

The shift towards integrated health systems, which combine activities across primary, secondary, and tertiary healthcare sectors, introduces a multitude of new roles and professional challenges for healthcare and other experts involved in the complex process of healthcare provision. Considering nursing's status as the most populous profession within global healthcare systems, it is evident that nurses will play—or already play—a significant role in the new organizational structures of healthcare systems (Čukljek, S., 2005).

With the enhanced positioning of the nursing profession within modern healthcare systems, nurses are now regarded as autonomous healthcare professionals and valued members of multidisciplinary teams. This expanded recognition provides nurses with numerous opportunities to actively contribute to the overall enhancement of healthcare quality. They engage in direct healthcare provision, focus on health improvement and preservation, and undertake various coordinating and managerial functions. However, it's crucial to highlight that embracing these new roles within reformed healthcare systems necessitates a willingness to shoulder more complex forms of professional responsibility among nursing professionals. This underscores the imperative for changes within the profession itself, particularly in terms of formal education and training. Nurses must be adequately prepared to assume leadership roles (Henderson, V., 1978).

3. NURSING'S VITAL ROLE IN MODERN HEALTHCARE SYSTEMS

The nursing profession, as an essential component of the multidisciplinary framework in modern healthcare systems, encompasses a wide array of professional activities across various levels of healthcare. These activities include initiatives for health improvement and promotion, disease prevention, healthcare provision for individuals of all ages with physical or mental illnesses or disabilities, as well as palliative care.

Moreover, nursing involves engaging in activities that may not seem directly associated with the profession at first glance, such as managerial roles within the healthcare system, advocating for patients' rights, promoting and implementing environmental protection measures, conducting scientific research, and actively participating in the formulation of national health policies.

Within integrated healthcare systems, nurses collaborate with other healthcare professionals and experts from diverse social protection fields. Together, they undertake planning, implementation, and evaluation of a wide range of healthcare initiatives. Their collective efforts aim to ensure the efficient functioning of the healthcare system, with a focus on health promotion, disease prevention, and comprehensive care for individuals, including those with disabilities (Knežević, D., Jović, D., & Egeljić, N. 2020).

The transformation of the nursing role within reformed European and North American healthcare systems is prominently evident in primary healthcare and community health protection, including public health. Nurses have assumed pivotal roles in organizing work systems within these sectors, acting as a vital link between healthcare users and the broader health and social care system. This necessitates nurses to consistently apply acquired skills through ongoing education, including understanding the functioning of the healthcare system, coordinating care across different levels, optimizing services through evidence-based practices, engaging in interprofessional collaboration and communication, and actively participating in efforts to enhance healthcare system efficiency.

The Initiative on the Future of Nursing, issued by the US Institute of Medicine in 2010, emphasizes the critical contribution of the nursing profession to healthcare system reform and meeting the evolving needs of healthcare users. Research suggests that all nursing professionals must acknowledge and embrace the need for substantial changes in nursing practice to achieve desired healthcare quality. Moreover, they should actively engage in change initiatives, acquiring new skills or enhancing existing ones to better address community health needs (Prić, N., 2020).

In the integrated healthcare system, nursing has shifted its focus to new objectives: rather than

solely addressing diseases, nurses prioritize enhancing health and primary prevention. Their professional activities now revolve around addressing the needs of individuals and communities—those who utilize healthcare services—rather than solely catering to systemic demands. The coordination among nurses across various healthcare sectors is recognized as crucial for enhancing quality, service provision, and cost-effectiveness within the healthcare system. These endeavors are underpinned by the judicious utilization of data available in health information systems. To realize these goals in reformed healthcare systems, nurses are tasked not only with managerial duties but also with essential aspects of daily practice aimed at maximizing healthcare efficiency. These aspects include providing support and training to users for self-help measures, offering education, facilitating communication, providing counseling, engaging in planning and cooperation, and delivering healthcare while preserving health (Knežević, D., Jović, D., & Egeljić, N. 2020).

For decades, the nursing profession has been actively engaged in public health endeavors worldwide. The symbiotic relationship between nursing and public health is fundamental and practical, with a shared focus on enhancing and safeguarding the health of individuals, groups, and communities. This partnership emphasizes disease prevention and endeavors to enhance overall quality of life. Moreover, it recognizes that health education is integral to healthcare, serving as an applied medical discipline and a fundamental method within public health practice. Furthermore, in many countries globally, nurses have the opportunity to specialize in public health following their foundational studies. The American Public Health Association characterizes nursing in public health as the practice of promoting and safeguarding the health of populations through the integrated application of knowledge from healthcare, social, and public health sciences (Čukljek, S, 2005).

4. EVOLUTION OF NURSING PRACTICE: FROM TRADITION TO AUTONOMY IN PUBLIC HEALTH

In the contemporary healthcare system, public health nursing is dedicated to enhancing health outcomes across all segments of the community. Recognizing the intricate nature of public health issues and the multifaceted determinants of health—including historical, cultural, physical, mental, social, and environmental factors—public health nursing operates within a framework that emphasizes logical system-level thinking. This approach involves objectively observing and assessing the health situation, identifying healthcare needs, and evaluating the capabilities and disparities among individuals, families, or communities. The ultimate goal is to undertake actions that transform health information into a public good. Critical components of nursing practice in public health encompass: prioritizing the health needs of the entire population, including assessing potential discrimination and addressing specific requirements of marginalized groups; evaluating the health status of the population through a comprehensive, holistic, and systematic approach to health assessment; implementing preventive measures with a focus on primary prevention within the community; and applying healthcare interventions across all levels—individuals, families, and the community as a whole—while considering all factors influencing their health, needs, opportunities, or health disparities.

Furthermore, in modern public health, nursing is expected to establish and maintain active partnerships with the community, continuously engage in health education initiatives for community members, and contribute to the development of local health policies tailored to the specific needs of the community (Živanović, D., 2021).

The question of nursing identity has become increasingly prominent, particularly with the transition of nursing education from hospital-based settings to academic environments. What defines nursing identity and its intrinsic value structure? These inquiries have been frequently posed over recent decades by members of the profession as well as broader society. The issue of nursing identity is closely intertwined with the gradual erosion of the unquestioned authority of physicians over other healthcare personnel in clinical settings during the mid-20th century. This erosion can be attributed to two primary factors. Firstly, it stems from heightened patient awareness regarding personal rights, particularly the right to autonomy in crucial treatment decisions. Secondly, and decisively for nursing identity, it arises from professionalization and the mechanization of nursing practice. Consequently, there has been a heightened need for profound reflection on specialized areas of nursing practice (Henderson, V, 1978).

From its traditional role as passive assistance to its contemporary status as an autonomous profession actively contributing to the efficiency and advancement of all sectors within integrated healthcare systems, nursing has consistently encountered numerous professional and societal challenges throughout its historical progression. Continuously striving to meet the evolving needs of society while shaping contemporary roles and addressing contemporary challenges, nursing has endeavored to

enhance its professional status and social standing. Given the holistic nature of healthcare as a scientific discipline and nursing's status as the most populous healthcare profession, many countries worldwide have entrusted nursing with pivotal roles in healthcare system reform and integration, particularly within the realm of public health. Within these frameworks, nurses have demonstrated significant potential and have been recognized for their capacity to assume leadership roles in bolstering community health resources, environmental protection, and achieving social equity. Nurses primarily contribute to these endeavors through their direct and objective influence on all aspects of population health, researching and applying modern health promotion concepts within communities, and actively participating in the formulation of official public health policies (Egenes, K. J, 2017).

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, nursing stands as the backbone of healthcare, embodying a sense of calling, motivation, creativity, expertise, and knowledge. Yet, despite the tireless efforts of nurses, their invaluable contributions often go unnoticed by the public eye. This lack of recognition stems from insufficient lobbying and media representation, resulting in the marginalization of nursing in contemporary society. However, within the nursing profession, there are organizations such as nursing health chambers that work diligently to unite the nursing community and elevate its significance, particularly within the healthcare sector. Lobbying by various nursing organizations and institutions is imperative for garnering the recognition and support that nurses deserve. It plays a crucial role in the socio-political system of a democratic society, ensuring that the voices of nurses are heard and their needs addressed. Moreover, effective lobbying is essential for a country's positioning and participation in international systems and institutions, particularly those related to healthcare. Moving forward, it is essential to amplify the advocacy efforts for nursing, both at the grassroots level and within policy-making circles. By raising awareness of the invaluable role of nurses and advocating for their rights and interests, we can create a healthcare system that truly values and supports the nursing profession. Only through concerted lobbying and advocacy can we ensure that nurses receive the recognition, respect, and support they deserve as the cornerstone of healthcare delivery.

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