

NURSING ROLES IN THE PROFESSIONALISM OF HEALTH CAREERS ON ECUADOR

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Abstract

The objective of this review article is to compare the degree of professionalism exhibited by nurses in healthcare careers in Ecuador. The methodology employed in this study utilizes a qualitative approach with a descriptive scope. The design of the study was informed by a systematic review of 12 scientific articles obtained from the MyLOFT UCV virtual library, as well as scientific journals from websites such as PubMed, ProSciences, SCIELO, Scopus, and EBSCO. The four roles of nursing as a profession were considered: care, administration, research, and teaching. The results of the study indicated that most of the studies employed a descriptive qualitative approach, wherein researchers conducted bibliographic reviews on the professionalism of nurses. It has been determined that nursing professionals determine the timing of their execution of the four roles constituting their graduate profile, while maintaining a sense of relevance. The barriers that formerly limited the development of nursing professionals' competencies are now being dismantled through the implementation of a professional approach. A re-evaluation of the nursing curriculum is imperative in both public and private institutions, with the objective of enhancing pedagogy and administration competencies. This re-evaluation should be grounded in the contemporary framework of health systems.

Keywords: nursing roles, professionalism, discipline, healthcare career

Resumen

El presente artículo de revisión tuvo como objetivo: contrastar el profesionalismo de la enfermería en las carreras sanitarias del Ecuador. En la metodología empleada presenta un enfoque cualitativo con alcance descriptivo, su diseño está basado en la revisión sistémica de 12 artículos científicos obtenidos desde la biblioteca virtual MyLOFT UCV, así como revistas científicas de páginas como PubMed, ProSciences, SCIELO, Scopus, EBSCO, considerando los cuatro roles de enfermería como profesión: asistencial, administrativo, investigación y docencia. Como resultados se determinó que: la mayoría de los estudios presentan un enfoque cualitativo de tipo descriptivo, donde los investigadores han realizados revisiones bibliográficas sobre el profesionalismo de los y las enfermeras. Se concluye que, el profesional de enfermería decide en qué momento desenvolverse en cada uno de los cuatro roles que tiene como perfil de egreso, sin dejar a un lado el sentido de pertinencia; con el profesionalismo, en la actualidad se están quedando atrás aquellas barreras que ponían limitaciones el desarrollo de las competencias del profesional de enfermería, también, se debería reestructurar la malla curricular de la carrera de enfermería en instituciones públicas y privadas donde se fortalezca los conocimientos de pedagogía y administración basados en el marco actual de los sistemas sanitarios.

Palabras clave: roles de enfermería, profesionalismo, disciplina, carrera sanitaria

INTRODUCTION

Florence Nightingale, who was born in Italy on May 12, 1820, is widely regarded as the "Lady with the Lamp" and the "mother of modern nursing." Her humanistic and healthcare contributions to the well-being of patients and their environment have been instrumental in establishing her as a seminal figure in the nursing profession. To this day, she remains a source of inspiration for the study of nursing, as evidenced by her seminal contributions to the field in 1860, when she pioneered the introduction of trained nurses into home care in England and Ireland. Furthermore, she pioneered the establishment of nursing schools, with the objective of cultivating nurses on a global scale. In her pedagogical approach, she placed significant emphasis on the inculcation of moral values as a prerequisite for nursing education. During the Crimean War, she demonstrated that knowledge is not only based on theory, but must also be interconnected with practice to be incorporated into nursing practices. At that time, the investigative, teaching, and care roles were already being promoted empirically, and today, with advances in education, the administrative role has also emerged (Naranjo Hernández, 2020).

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Manuela de Santa Cruz y Espejo is a figure of seminal importance in the field of nursing in Ecuador. She is regarded as the country's first nurse, having commenced her professional journey providing assistance to her brother, Dr. Eugenio de Santa Cruz y Espejo, in his medical practice. In 1764, she provided care to her brother Juan Pablo, who was ill, thus establishing herself as a pioneering figure in the field of nursing in Ecuador. Manuelita, with her medical expertise, frequently participated as a nurse in her brother's medical visits, providing free care to numerous individuals in 1785 when the city of Quito was experiencing a yellow fever epidemic. (Franco Coffre & Oviedo Rodríguez, 2023).

The first military nursing school in Ecuador was established in the city of Quito in 1906 during the administration of General Eloy Alfaro, following the military conflict with Peru. Subsequently, in 1917, the civil nursing school was established in the city of Quito, affiliated with the Faculty of Medicine of the Central University, without maintaining an academic character. Conversely, in Guayaquil, it was founded in 1929 by Executive Decree No. 27, signed by the president at that time, Dr. Isidro Ayora Cueva, and has belonged to the Faculty of Medical Sciences of the University of Guayaquil since then. The institution was initially established under the name Escuela de Enfermeras (School of Nurses), with an initial enrollment of six students and a curriculum that was formally approved in 1930. The curriculum included a prerequisite of completing primary education for admission. However, in 1957, in response to emerging health needs, it was determined that the number of graduates was inadequate. Consequently, the institution underwent a name change to Escuela de Enfermería (School of Nursing), and a high school diploma was introduced as an admission requirement. In approximately 1983, the curriculum underwent a restructuring based on the nation's needs at the time, with the subsequent implementation slated for 1984. This restructuring entailed the introduction of a four-year program, culminating in a Bachelor's degree in Nursing (Elizalde Ordóñez & Ordóñez Sigcho, 2021).

In its early days, nursing was predicated on caring for the sick; it was formerly considered a job performed by women who did not have a basic level of education. As a result, the duties of nurses depended on the support of doctors. However, in the 20th century, it began to be recognized as a profession, with autonomy prevailing and the contempt for the profession and denigration of those who practiced it being left behind (Ayala Larios & González Sosa, 2023).

The evolution of nursing as a profession can be traced back to the seminal contributions of Florence Nightingale, who pioneered the concept of promoting health through the knowledge and application of science to improve the health of individuals, families, and communities. Since 1965 (with official recognition beginning in 1974), International Nurses Day has been commemorated annually on May 12, coinciding with the birth of the pioneering figure in modern nursing. As stated by Gallegos (2020).

It is evident that nursing has evolved into a pivotal component within the healthcare sector, underpinned by a holistic and humanized approach to care. This evolution is predicated on the fundamental objective of enhancing the well-being of patients, families, and communities. The trajectory of the field since its inception has facilitated the enhancement of its various competencies. (Ayala Larios & González Sosa, 2023). The field of nursing has come to occupy a prominent position in Ecuador's healthcare professions, largely due to its foundation in scientific knowledge. This has enabled the development of critical thinking and clinical judgment skills among nurses, facilitating the implementation of the Nursing Care Process (NCP). The NCP is guided by the taxonomies of NANDA (North American Nursing Diagnosis Association), NOC (Nursing Outcomes Classification), and NIC (Nursing Interventions Classification). As stated by Espinosa, Rojas, and Contreras Briceño (2022).

A notable distinction exists between the terms "nursing as a discipline" and "nursing as a profession." Nursing as a discipline refers to the training one acquires to learn and acquire knowledge that evolves independently and will be put into practice in the future. Nursing as a profession refers to the skills one has when caring for patients, families, and/or the community. Consequently, during the academic training process, nursing is regarded as a discipline. However, from the commencement of practical training, the transition to a professional vocation is initiated. Following the completion of the theoretical and practical cycles, nursing students undertake their pre-professional internships, designated as rotating internships. During these internships, students rotate through four distinct areas of specialization: clinical surgery, gynecology and obstetrics, family and community health, and pediatrics. This experience provides an opportunity for students to apply their scientific knowledge and skills acquired during their training process. Over the course of their professional tenure, they assimilate the experiential knowledge acquired through their professional practice and the theoretical knowledge obtained during their academic training, which collectively fosters the development of a professional ethos (Freire, Freire & García Tene, 2021).

In Ecuador, the professional qualification exam (EHEP) has been in effect since 2014. This exam was established in 2010, as outlined in Article 104 of the Organic Law on Higher Education. The Council for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CACES) is responsible for the development of this examination. Initially, the exam was administered to graduates of medicine, dentistry, and nursing programs at public institutions. In these institutions, professionals' aptitudes are evaluated based on the assumption that their academic training is sufficient for the performance of their professional duties. In October 2015, nursing graduates were required to take this

examination for the first time, and it has since become a prerequisite for those seeking to practice the profession (CACES, 2024).

Nursing schools and/or programs within the nursing professional profile delineate four specific roles or autonomous functions: care, teaching, research, and administration. In the care role, nursing professionals are responsible for ensuring the well-being of patients, families, and/or communities. In the research role, it is imperative to maintain a cross-disciplinary approach to scientific contributions, thereby promoting innovation in a competitive global environment. In the administrative role, one of the requisite skills is the ability to organize the staff under their charge (i.e., graduates, technicians, and/or assistants) with consideration for skills such as leadership, active listening, and assertive communication, among others. In the context of professional education, healthcare professionals assume a pivotal role in imparting knowledge to both professional and non-professional nurses. This transmission of knowledge, when effectively integrated into clinical practice, is instrumental in enhancing patient care outcomes (Espinosa Aguilar & Oria Saavedra, 2023).

Since 2005, there has been an increasing diversification of nursing specializations, including but not limited to mental health, geriatrics, family and community nursing, pediatrics, and obstetrics and gynecology. However, with the advancement of scientific knowledge in recent decades, postgraduate programs now offer a variety of master's degrees in health, including nursing management, which extends beyond the scope of administration. This development has led to the establishment of a doctoral program in nursing as a distinct field of study. This discipline has overcome the misconceptions of the past, which held that nurses had limited skills. Advancements in the field have given rise to a novel conceptualization of nursing, which is now regarded as a complex science that necessitates critical thinking and facilitates the expansion of scientific knowledge. Consequently, the postgraduate courses available have enabled nursing professionals to contribute to the formulation of public policies aimed at addressing human health concerns from a nursing perspective. These contributions are instrumental in maintaining the relevance of nursing as a discipline (Altamira Camacho, 2023).

Achieving a professional standard in nursing practice necessitates that practitioners possess the necessary competencies to perform their duties competently. The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) asserts that nursing professionals possess a wide range of competencies that can be exercised across various levels of healthcare, encompassing domains such as occupational health and health services management (Bravo Alcívar & Villegas Chiriboga, 2023).

The commitment of nursing professionals is linked to the values and skills they must put into practice in the development of their competencies. These competencies include leadership, innovation, honesty, good treatment of patients and their families, and decision-making. As a health science, this profession is undergoing constant evolution, with the new generation of nursing professionals demonstrating a commitment to participating in training courses and conferences, among other activities, to strengthen their skills and update their knowledge (Amezcuca, 2024).

The objective of this study is to compare the degree of professionalism exhibited by nurses in healthcare careers in Ecuador. The following specific objectives have been identified: 1. The objective of this study is to provide an epistemological analysis of nursing as a fundamental discipline in healthcare careers; 2. The study will also differentiate the roles played by nursing staff in healthcare careers; and 3. The purpose of this study is to elucidate the contributions of nursing that result in the development of a professional identity.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed presents a qualitative approach with a descriptive scope, and its design is based on a systemic review grounded in its epistemology. Twelve scientific articles were used, obtained through the MyLOFT UCV virtual library, as well as scientific journals from websites such as Clinical Key, SCIELO, Scopus, and EBSCO, considering professionalism and the four roles of nursing as a profession: care, administration, research, and teaching.

For the selection of articles, those that lacked information, duplicate studies, undergraduate theses, as well as those that were not consistent or relevant to the related topic were excluded. In the search for information, articles were considered, prioritizing English and Spanish languages and a range of five years up to the present year (2020–2024).

The originality of the review article is supported by research ethics, considering aspects such as integrity, intellectual honesty, truthfulness, responsibility, and transparency. Authenticity and authorship in scientific research are respected through citations and bibliographic references from the authors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Most studies present a descriptive qualitative approach, in which researchers have conducted literature reviews on the professionalism of nurses. Twelve articles were considered, taking into account five thematic areas detailed below.

Table 1. Studies found on professionalism and nursing roles

	Author and year	Country/Region	Thematic axis	Name of study	Design
1	(Arechabala Mantuliz & Barrios Araya, 2023)	Chile	Professionalism	Construction and attributes of professionalism in a nursing school in Chile.	Qualitative
2	(Cucala Rovira, 2023)	España		Elements and strategies that enable professionalism among nurses in hospitals.	Qualitative-quantitative
3	(Nashwan, 2023)	Doha		The Vital Role of Career Pathways in Nursing: A	Qualitative
4	(Mazacón Gómez & Paliz Sánchez, 2020)	Ecuador	Administration	Key to Growth and Retention.	Qualitative
5	(Camacho Hernández, 2023)	Cuba		Professional nursing competencies and their effect on professional work.	Qualitative
6	(Samper Amargós & González Viana, 2023)	Spain	Assistance	Conception of the management process in the context of Professional Nursing.	Qualitative
7	(González, 2021)	Argentina		The role of the nurse in the field of public health	Quantitative
8	(Moro Tejedor & García Pozo, 2023)	Spain	Research	Nursing governance in integrated health service networks and its impact on care processes in primary care teams	Qualitative
9	(Martínez Trujillo, 2020)	Cuba		The role of nurses in research.	Quantitative
10	(Robles Mirabal & Serrano Díaz, 2021)	Cuba		Capacities for research in health policies and systems in nursing.	Qualitative
11	(Ruiz Reyes & Navarro Bustamante, 2020)	Cuba	Teaching	The research activity of nursing graduates in primary health care	Qualitative
12	(Norris Waller & Newsome Mechas, 2021)	USA		Brief analysis of trends in the development of nursing education in Cuba.	Qualitative

Source: own elaboration (2024)

Professionalism

In the article entitled "Elements and strategies that enable professionalism among nurses in hospitals," the objective was to establish the elements that define professionalism among nurses. The conclusion of the study was that professionalism must be promoted through nursing management based on four dimensions: personal, workplace, healthcare system, and social (Cucala Rovira, 2023).

In the article "Construction and attributes of professionalism in a nursing school in Chile," the authors contend that professionalism is an essential attribute that contributes to the development of the nursing professional and the quality of care provided to society (Arechabala Mantuliz & Barrios Araya, 2023).

Conversely, the article "The Vital Role of Career Pathways in Nursing: A Key to Growth and Retention," the author indicates that prioritizing career paths is crucial for professional development and guarantees the provision of high-quality care to patients in the current healthcare system (Nashwan, 2023).

At this juncture, it is imperative to underscore the pivotal role of humanized care in fostering professionalism. Decisions made in professional practice must be anchored in the quality of care we deliver within a healthcare service framework. This, in turn, enables individuals to achieve their optimal personal and professional growth.

Assistential role

In the article, "The role of the nurse in the field of public health," the authors emphasize that the healthcare functions of nursing professionals include disease prevention, surveillance, and control; health promotion; and care for vulnerable groups, thereby enabling the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in public health (Samper Amargós & González Viana, 2023).

However, as articulated in the article, "Nursing governance in integrated health service networks and its impact on care processes in primary care teams," nursing professionals, through governance mechanisms, are equipped to oversee patients afflicted with chronic noncommunicable diseases (CNCDs) across the three levels of care (González, 2021).

It is noteworthy that the scope of nursing care encompasses clinical assessment of patients, a component of the Nursing Care Process (NCP). This assessment can be conducted at various levels of complexity, ranging from primary health care to the most intricate hospital settings.

Administrative role

In the article, "Professional Nursing Competencies and their Effect on Professional Work," the authors observe that nursing professionals have progressively assumed a more prominent role within the healthcare system, a development attributable to their competencies. These competencies, when applied with ethics and responsibility in management and administration, necessitate the exercise of leadership (Mazacón Gómez & Paliz Sánchez, 2020).

Conversely, in the article "Conception of the management process in the context of Professional Nursing," the author posits that management is intrinsic to the organization of activities in the healthcare system. Despite its complexity, based on theoretical aspects, nursing professionals must approach management with discipline (Camacho Hernández, 2023).

Investigative role

In the article "Capacities for Research in Health Policies and Systems in Nursing," the author sought to describe the capacities of nursing professionals at the three levels of care to conduct research on health policies and systems. The study found that the capacities identified result in the development of research to solve problems at each level of care (Martínez Trujillo, 2020).

However, as discussed in the article "The role of nurses in research," there has been an increase in the participation of nursing professionals in research, leading to the emergence of four distinct profiles: clinical research nurses, nurse researchers, research support nurses, and research consumer nurses. Each of these profiles possesses unique functions and training requirements (Moro Tejedor & García Pozo, 2023).

Conversely, in the article "The Research Activity of Nursing Graduates in Primary Health Care," the authors posit that scientific research is not solely predicated on the creation of knowledge, but also on its application for the benefit of the broader community (Robles Mirabal & Serrano Díaz, 2021).

In this section, it is important to note that support nurses guide professionals who are conducting research in their care role and have a deficit in the field of research. Conversely, the term "nurse consumers" signifies the encouragement of graduate nurses to engage in research, thereby expanding and strengthening their knowledge base and maintaining currency with the evolving taxonomy of nursing diagnoses, as delineated by the NANDA taxonomy.

Teaching role

The article, "A brief trend analysis of teaching development in Nursing Education in Cuba," sought to identify trends that mark the development of nursing education in Cuba. The authors of the article point out that the primary aim of Cuban nursing education is to train health professionals capable of facing the world inspired by health prevention and promotion (Ruiz Reyes & Navarro Bustamante, 2020).

However, the article, "Is there still value in teaching nursing theory?" points out that nursing teachers are responsible for generating and implementing new research-based knowledge for the development of competencies in addressing patient complexity. This implies assuming their role as theorists to put it into practice (Norris, Waller & Newsome Mechas, 2021).

It is imperative to acknowledge the pivotal role that nursing educators currently play in the accreditation process of degree programs, as this ensures the standard of education is maintained. However, the evaluation of teachers is not solely conducted by the students; the accrediting body also plays a role in this evaluation. This multifaceted evaluation process fosters the practical application of pedagogical tools, thereby integrating knowledge with real-world application.

CONCLUSION

The capacity to function in a professional way is a hallmark of nursing professionals, enabling them to oversee healthcare services and reach conclusions when confronted with circumstances. This ability is further bolstered by the dissolution of the barriers that formerly constrained their abilities.

Nursing professionals determine the appropriate timing for each of the four roles constituting their graduate profile, while maintaining a clear sense of purpose. However, a re-evaluation of the nursing curriculum is imperative in both public and private institutions to enhance knowledge of pedagogy and administration, with this enhancement being based on the current framework of healthcare systems.

The contemporary fourth-level degree programs have led to an augmentation of the administrative, research, and teaching functions within nursing roles. This development can be traced back to the inception of pre-professional internships, which have contributed to the evolution of nursing care over time.

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