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# Supervised internship and covid-19 pandemic: experience of nursing students in an intensive care unit

Estágio supervisionado e pandemia da covid-19: experiência de estudantes de enfermagem em unidade de terapia intensiva

Prácticas supervisada y pandemia covid-19: experiencia de estudiantes de enfermería en una unidad de cuidados intensivos

## RESUMO

Objetivo: relatar as experiências de estudantes de enfermagem durante o estágio curricular supervisionado. Método: trata-se de relato sobre a experiência de acadêmicas de enfermagem que realizaram o ensino clínico supervisionado em Unidade Terapêutica Intensiva COVID-19 a través dos instrumentos, técnica de observação e diário de campo. A coleta de dados ocorreu no período de fevereiro a abril de 2021 por meio de rodas de conversas que aconteciam uma vez por semana, proporcionadas pelo preceptor, onde foram problematizadas as vivências no campo de estágio. Resultados: as estagiárias aprofundaram seus conhecimentos acerca dos protocolos da instituição, sistema eletrônico e rotinas do setor. Apesar das mudanças repentinas no fluxo de atendimento ao paciente com COVID-19 na unidade, as acadêmicas demonstraram adaptação, raciocínio crítico, destreza prática, boa comunicação, relacionamento com a equipe e tomada de decisão. Conclusão: a experiência foi significativa, agregando grande amadurecimento às estagiárias, tornando-as protagonista na gestão do cuidado ao paciente com COVID-19.

**DESCRIPTORES:** Educação em enfermagem; Enfermagem de cuidados críticos; Estudantes de enfermagem; Assistência hospitalar; Infecções por coronavírus.

## ABSTRACT

Objective: to report the experiences of nursing students during the supervised curricular internship. Method: this is a report on the experience of nursing students who performed supervised clinical teaching in the COVID-19 Intensive Care Unit through instruments observation techniques and a field diary. Data collection took place from February to April 2021 through conversation circles that took place once a week, provided by the preceptor, where experiences in the internship field were discussed. Results: the interns deepened their knowledge about the institution's protocols, electronic system and sector routines. Despite the sudden changes in the flow of care for patients with COVID-19 in the unit, the students demonstrated adaptation, critical thinking, practical skills, good communication, relationship with the team and decision-making. Conclusion: the experience was significant, adding great maturity to the interns, making them protagonists in the management of patient care with COVID-19.

**DESCRIPTORS:** Nursing education; Critical care nursing; Nursing students; Hospital care; Coronavirus infections.

## RESUMEN

Objetivo: reportar las experiencias de los estudiantes de enfermería durante la pasantía curricular supervisada. Método: se trata de un informe sobre la experiencia de estudiantes de enfermería que realizaron docencia clínica supervisada en la Unidad de Cuidados Intensivos COVID-19 através de instrumentos técnicas, observación y un diario de campo. La recolección de datos se llevó a cabo de febrero a abril de 2021 a través de círculos de conversación que se realizaban una vez a la semana, proporcionados por el preceptor, donde se discutían experiencias en el campo de las prácticas. Resultados: los pasantes profundizaron sus conocimientos sobre los protocolos de la institución, el sistema electrónico y las rutinas del sector. A pesar de los cambios bruscos en el flujo de atención de los pacientes con COVID-19 en la unidad, los estudiantes demostraron adaptación, pensamiento crítico, habilidades prácticas, buena comunicación, relación con el equipo y toma de decisiones. Conclusión: la experiencia fue significativa, aportando gran madurez a los internos, haciéndolos protagonistas en el manejo de la atención al paciente con COVID-19.

**DESCRIPTORES:** Educación en enfermería; Enfermería de cuidados críticos; Estudiantes de enfermería; Atención hospitalaria; Infecciones por coronavirus.

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**INTRODUCTION**

The training of nurses in Brazil has been widely debated by institutions and has generated numerous opinions and resolutions. The nursing course consists of a wide range of theoretical-practical disciplines that are essential for future professionals to be able to work in the labor market.<sup>1</sup>

The National Curriculum Guidelines (NCG) establish the desired professional profile, the essential skills and determine the minimum curriculum structure, with the Supervised Curricular Internship (SCI) being an important tool between academia and services, enabling the use of knowledge, skills, attitudes and the training of professionals.<sup>2</sup> Although students obtain the necessary skills and competences to act in different health scenarios, acting in the coronavirus pandemic context becomes a major health challenge.<sup>3</sup>

The rapid human spread of COVID-19, discovered in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, drove the disease outbreak to pandemic in March 2019.<sup>4</sup> This infection can be transmitted by inhalation or direct contact with infected droplets and can progress to its most severe form, causing respiratory failure, and 10 to 20% of infected patients

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need to be admitted to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU).<sup>5</sup>

The ICU is a highly complex sector, a characteristic defined by the patients treated, who often need invasive and complex diagnostic-therapeutic interventions. The nurse has a central role in the management of processes and care for critical patients, being responsible for the improvement, supervision of the nursing staff and management of technologies.<sup>6</sup>

Coping with the COVID-19 pandemic can lead to work overload and negative impact on the physical and mental health of nursing professionals. In addition, the terrible working conditions, the high number of absenteeism, lack of basic supplies such as Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), the feeling of fear and anguish of becoming infected with the virus can lead to aggravation of this situation.<sup>7</sup> In this context, nursing students in the last year of the course who are in the process of professional development and at the same time working on the front line of COVID-19, are included.<sup>3</sup>

We know that the COVID-19 pandemic has made critical patient care challenging. Health institutions had the enormous challenge of adapting their physical struc-

ture, capitalizing human resources, creating strategies to ensure safety for their patients and employees, adapting flows and dealing with the overcrowding of the ICU sector. 4

The student who is studying the SCI in the ICU has the possibility to act on the front line in the pandemic, contribute with their profession and in the care of patients with coronaviruses. It is believed that this experience can enable rich learning for the formation of students. Therefore, the aim of this study is to report the experiences of nursing students during SCI in an ICU COVID-19.

## METHOD

This is an experience report, with a descriptive-reflective nature, on the experiences of undergraduate nursing students at Centro Universitário São Camilo in the development of the SCI.

The SCI in hospital care has a total workload of 200 hours and the activities developed are supervised either by the teacher or by the nurse responsible for the unit in which the student was allocated.

The study setting was the adult ICU of a large private hospital located in the west side of the city of São Paulo. This institution has a total capacity of 271 hospital beds in the following sectors: medical clinic, surgical clinic and ICU. During the pandemic, a COVID-19 treatment center was set up with 120 beds, 70 of which were exclusively for the ICU.

The study population consisted of nursing students from the 9th period, afternoon shift, attending the SCI in hospital management. The estimated universe of students who attended the SCI was 09 students. Among these, 02 students who were allocated to the ICU COVID-19 showed interest in reporting their experiences through the field diary.

The following data collection instrument was used: 1) Participant observation with a field diary, where students described the activities experienced in the field on a daily basis; 2) Interview with selected students through an unstructured script of questions about their experiences, fears,

anxieties and difficulties.

Data collection took place from February to April 2021 through conversation circles that took place once a week, provided by the tutor with the students, where the experiences in the internship field were discussed.

From the interviews with the students, the most important themes were selected to compose the description of this report. As well as the observation and participation reported in the field diary, this one used to describe the experiences lived by the students.

As it is an experience report, this study does not require approval by a research ethics committee.

## RESULTS

The internship began on February 2nd through a meeting on an online platform, in which the students were able to meet their preceptor and what responsibilities they would have during the SCI. Upon arrival at the hospital, a technical visit was carried out to present the field, flow and processes. The ICU was divided into posts: Coronary Unit, Multidrug-resistant ICU, Surgical ICU, General ICU and COVID ICU. Each nursing station has between 6 and 8 beds, with an occupancy rate ranging from 50% to 100%. With the pandemic, it was necessary to create care flows to ensure patient safety with and without COVID-19. In the restricted area, patients suspected or confirmed for COVID-19 were hospitalized, while the free flow area was designated for general care not related to the coronavirus. At first, the students stayed in the free flow area.

The 13 weeks of learning were intense, involving a lot of observation, clinical reasoning, execution of procedures, search for knowledge, anxiety and fears; being in a new unit with a new team, where it is necessary to develop skills to be a competent and prepared professional, caused several insecurities and anxieties.

The second wave of the pandemic, at the end of February, generated an overcrowding in the ICU with restricted flow. The

hospital board, together with the nursing coordination, made adaptations to the new reality, both in terms of infrastructure and human resources. In the new scenario, free flow ICUs were transferred to medical clinic sectors and later 70 ICU beds were released only for admissions of patients with COVID-19.

Faced with the critical situation, the students were able to choose whether or not they would follow the SCI, taking into account their health conditions, dialogue with the family and the desire to act in this scenario, helping to save lives, help the team and, in fact, make a difference. When they decided to remain in the SCI, the students were instructed and reinforced about the use of personal protective equipment and all other precautions necessary to reduce the risk of contamination. It should be noted that both were immunized.

The interns deepened their knowledge through training and qualifications on the institution's protocols, electronic system and ICU routines. Working in the COVID-19 ICU was like being in a war field without seeing the enemy; several devices, technological devices and drugs were used to ensure a better quality of care for critically ill patients.

The change in the profile of patients made the sector even more critical, as the vast majority had severe respiratory impairment, requiring orotracheal intubation and even cardiopulmonary support. It was noticed how clinically difficult the management of critically ill patients with COVID-19 is, with nursing being fundamental in providing this care, positively impacting the patient's outcome.

The interns assumed the role of the SCI, placing themselves at the center of the patient care process, leading the team, assisting in decision-making, performing procedures that are exclusive to nurses and providing direct assistance to patients with COVID-19.

## DISCUSSION

The SCI is an important tool for training nursing students. In this experience,

**It was noticed how clinically difficult the management of critically ill patients with COVID-19 is, with nursing being fundamental in providing this care, positively impacting the patient's outcome.**

the undergraduates had the opportunity to act on the front line in the fight against COVID-19. Despite the interruption of face-to-face activities in schools and universities across the country, the emergency situation in public health, overcrowding in the hospital network and lack of health professionals, especially those in nursing, led the president of the republic to sanction provisional measure number 934/2020, ensuring the completion of the undergraduate course in strategic areas to fight the pandemic.<sup>8</sup>

The scenario of the ICU COVID-19 was challenging, however, acting in the pandemic enabled the professional maturation and the development of skills and competences required by the NCG. It is known that working in unusual situations and under extreme pressure are part of the nurse's daily routine, regardless of the pandemic.<sup>9</sup> Studies reported that nursing professionals working on the front lines showed fear, anguish, anxiety and depression in the face of situations experienced in the pandemic.<sup>7,10</sup> Therefore, it is common for students to show fear, anxieties and insecurities at this time of role transition, in addition, these anxieties can be enhanced by the lack of information regarding the virus and its prevention measures.<sup>1,11</sup> Therefore, the reception by the team and the teacher can be an important tool for overcoming barriers and boosting the student's evolution.

Nursing managers have a fundamental role in detecting the team's weaknesses, being able to create strategies that enable the management of stress, physical and psychological relief. Materials management is another important task to ensure the adequate supply of PPE and the management of supplies such as monitors, mechanical ventilators, non-rebreathing masks and high-flow catheters, thus ensuring safe care for patients and employees.<sup>12</sup>

The undergraduates were trained in order to minimize the exposed risks and prepared to work on the front line. In this sense, education in health services is an important strategy to improve professional performance, leading the subject to improve their praxis, ensuring quality

of care.<sup>2</sup> Continuing Education (CE) has an important contribution to the development of good practices, professional autonomy and guidance in the workforce to deliver results.<sup>13</sup> In times of pandemic, the education of professionals becomes a great challenge due to the rules of social distancing necessary to prevent the proliferation of the coronavirus.<sup>14</sup> Despite this, it is up to the continuing education services to create strategies that facilitate the learning and recycling of their professionals, such as the use of lectures through videoconferences and the use of mobile applications.<sup>15</sup>

The nursing intern has a fundamental role in the nursing team, contributing to meet the extra demand for care, organization of the work process in health units and in patient care.<sup>3,16</sup> Therefore, it is necessary to include nursing interns in the educational actions and training proposed by the EP, making them multipliers of good care practices.

Carrying out the SCI in a pandemic context enabled the development of essential skills and competences for nursing practice. It is important to emphasize that the professional maturation process demands proactivity, leadership, search for innovation and new experiences.<sup>9</sup> The knowledge and experiences acquired during the pandemic are essential for the formation of a professional identity and for dealing with similar situations that may occur.<sup>3</sup> Acting in the pandemic reaffirms the importance of students in confronting COVID-19 and their ethical commitment to nursing and society.

## CONCLUSION

The SCI carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic brought great maturity, knowledge and professional growth to the interns, enabling them to acquire skills and competences proposed by the NCG. The moment required quick and dynamic adaptation and development of critical thinking, knowledge and decision-making, which contributed to the education of excellent nurses.

At the end of the internship, the students showed more confidence and confidence in carrying out procedures and in

managing the unit, the team and critical patient care, assuming the role of true nurses in the unit. Fears, anxieties and insecurities

were overcome and gave way to confident and confident future professionals.

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