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Perceptions of nutrition undergraduates on professional education in palliative care

Percepções de graduandos de nutrição sobre formação profissional em cuidados paliativos

Percepciones de los estudiantes del grado en nutrición sobre la formación profesional en cuidados paliativos

RESUMO

Objetivo: O presente estudo teve como objetivo identificar a abordagem de Cuidados Paliativos na formação acadêmica de discentes do curso de Nutrição de uma universidade federal do interior do Rio de Janeiro. Métodos: Trata-se de um estudo qualitativo, desenvolvido em 2018, com graduandos do Curso de Nutrição da Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Campus Macaé. Foi realizada uma exposição dialógica sobre o tema, seguida por aplicação de questionário semiestruturado e categorização temática das respostas. Resultados: Os discentes referiram que o tema Cuidados Paliativos foi pouco abordado na graduação e que seria fundamental para a formação ampliar esse conteúdo na matriz curricular. Conclusão: O presente estudo destaca fragilidades na formação em Cuidados Paliativos, que se correlacionam com lacunas gerais da formação em Nutrição e em saúde no Brasil. Reformulações curriculares são necessárias para aprofundar o conteúdo técnico na área e naturalizar discussões sobre a morte no ensino superior em saúde.

DESCRIPTORIOS: Cuidados Paliativos; Educação Superior; Capacitação de Recursos Humanos em Saúde.

ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to identify the Palliative Care approach in the academic training of Nutrition undergraduates of a federal university in Rio de Janeiro. Methods: This is a qualitative study, carried out in 2018, with undergraduates from the Nutrition Program at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Campus of Macaé. The participants attended a lectured on the subject, performed in a dialogical manner. They then answered a semi-structured questionnaire and it was done a thematic categorization of the answers. Results: The students reported that Palliative Care was hardly ever addressed during their courses and that expanding discussions on this topic was fundamental for their education. Conclusion: This present study sheds light on difficulties in Palliative Care education, which can be correlated to general gaps in nutrition and health training in Brazil. Curricular revisions are needed to deepen the technical content in the area and naturalize discussions about death in higher education.

DESCRIPTORS: Hospitalized Child; Children's Rights; Nursing Education.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Este estudio tuvo como objetivo identificar el enfoque de Cuidados Paliativos em la formación académica de estudiantes del curso de Nutrición de una universidad federal del interior de Río de Janeiro. Métodos: Se trata de una investigación cualitativa, desarrollada en 2018, con estudiantes del Grado en Nutrición en la Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Campus Macaé. Se realizó una exposición dialógica acerca del tema, seguida de la aplicación de una encuesta semiestructurada y categorización temático de las respuestas. Resultados: Los estudiantes informaron que son raras las veces en que la materia de Cuidados Paliativos es ministrada en la graduación y que sería fundamental para la formación ampliar este contenido en el plan de estudios. Conclusión: La investigación destaca las debilidades en la formación en Cuidados Paliativos, que se correlacionan con las brechas generales en la formación en nutrición y salud en Brasil. Se necesitan cambios curriculares para profundizar el contenido técnico em el área y naturalizar las discusiones sobre la muerte en la educación superior em salud.

DESCRIPTORIOS: Cuidados Paliativos; Educación Superior; Capacitación de Recusos Humanos em Salud.

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INTRODUCTION

Palliative Care (PC) is holistic and active care provided to individuals with intense suffering due to illness, especially those who are near the end of their lives. They focus on the patient, not their illness, with the aim of improving their quality of life, including attention to family members and caregivers. 1,2 Through Resolution No. 41 of October 31st, 2018, which provides for guidelines for PC within the scope of the Unified Health System (SUS), Brazil incorporated this approach to care in the health service. 3

It is, then, a recent incorporation and, therefore, training and professional performance in PC in Brazil still need to mature. 4 The skills that PC practice requires converge with the curricular guidelines proposed for courses in the health area, including the Nutrition course, which addresses the need for human, critical and reflective training. 5

A fundamental challenge is that the curriculum matrix in undergraduate courses in Nutrition in the country historically has a biomedical focus, with little space for learning in collective health and humanities, which constitute the foundation for undergraduates and future professionals for the practice of humanization and the development of critical thinking and the ability to handle complex situations. 6

Graduations implemented more recently within the scope of the expansion of higher education in Brazil 7 they may be more permeable to educational adjust-

ments. The Nutrition Course at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro - Campus Macaé Professor Aloísio Teixeira (UFRJ-Macaé) is part of this situation. Implemented in 2009, its teaching staff was recently constituted, the curricular matrices are still under construction and, since the beginning, an attempt has been made to overcome the duality between the understanding of health based on biological phenomena as opposed to social phenomena.8

As a way to bring elements to support the implementation of PC contents in the curriculum of undergraduate courses in Nutrition, this study aimed to identify the approach to the theme in the academic training of students of the Nutrition Course at UFRJ-Macaé and reaffirm the importance of the role of the professional nutritionist in the PC area.

METHODS

This is a descriptive and exploratory research, with a qualitative approach, developed in May 2018, with 15 students from the Nutrition Course at UFRJ-Macaé. The inclusion criteria for this study were: undergraduate students regularly enrolled in the 7th period of the Nutrition Course at that university, of both sexes and who agreed to participate in the research by signing the Informed Consent Form (ICF). Exclusion criteria were: students from other courses, from periods before or after the recommended period, those who refused to participate or did not sign the consent

form.

In order to identify the perceptions of future nutritionists, a dialogued exposition on the topic was made, characterized by a meeting lasting approximately 6 hours divided into morning and afternoon shifts, with a teacher and a student from the last period of the Nutrition course at UFRJ-Macaé. Reflections on finitude were proposed based on the exhibition of videos and group discussion on PC concepts, principles and guidelines.

The dialogued exhibition followed the dialogic educational model proposed by Paulo Freire, 9 based on the absence of a hierarchy of knowledge, seeking to value collective reflection, the active participation of undergraduates, the interaction of knowledge between all actors and the recycling of knowledge. This approach has the capacity to lead everyone involved to questioning, and to train more reflective people in order to stimulate the transformation of reality.

At the end, in order to identify the students' perceptions on the topic, the participants answered in writing, in a self-applied and individual way, a semi-structured questionnaire, developed specifically for the purposes of this study, containing open questions, whose central axes were: the approach of the theme in academic training and the importance of the role of the professional nutritionist in the PC area.

Qualitative content analysis was performed by thematic categorization. 10,11 The themes were initially identified during a

first reading of the material, explored and grouped according to their similarity, and later interpreted and organized into categories, comparing the collected material with the available literature on the topic.

The planning, execution and interpretation of results lasted a total of 12 months. All performance of the work was based on Resolution No. 510/2016, which discusses ethics, confidentiality and respect for dignity in research involving human beings. The research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at UFRJ-Macaé (registration nº 79452417.5.0000.5699) and all participants were previously informed about the study procedures and signed the informed consent.

RESULTS

The content of the participants' responses was analyzed in full. To identify the aspects that were the object of investigation in this study, thematic categories were defined by core meanings of the speeches, as described below:

The approach to the theme in academic training

Regarding the approach to the PC theme in the professional training of future nutritionists, the participants highlighted that they had little approach to the subject. One student commented that "I had no idea about the subject, much less heard about it in graduation" (A). Unanimously, the participants responded that it is necessary to broaden the discussion about PC in undergraduate courses, in order to favor the formation of more prepared and critical professionals: "I think [PC] is something that should be discussed in more depth [in the undergraduate course] not just for nutrition, but for all courses in the health area" (B).

The performance of professional nutritionists in the PC area

The students highlighted the importance of the nutritionist in the PC area, commenting that "food is something that permeates our lives and can contribute

positively [in PC]" (C). The possibility of professional protagonism in this area was also highlighted, in the context of multidisciplinary teamwork: "Considering nutrition as a key to well-being, I feel like a great influencer of the team to improve patient care near the end of life" (D). However, some records revealed obstacles related to teamwork and the professional autonomy of the nutritionist: "Sometimes we feel like a supporting role in the health team" (E).

DISCUSSION

Participants perceive the PC theme as relevant to their professional training, but they emphasize that they were little exposed to the subject, which can contribute to their feeling unprepared to work in the area. These professional challenges in dealing with PC patients may be correlated with training gaps and few theoretical discussions regarding human finitude. 4

Learning about therapeutic care with a curative emphasis is prioritized, and future professionals are not prepared to deal with death and dying. A similar perception was observed in previous surveys, which showed that students, residents and professionals from different areas of health (including Nursing, Medicine and Occupational Therapy), did not feel prepared to deal with death due to the absence of these discussions in graduation and learned about the subject only when they experienced situations of death and dying in their personal or professional lives. 12,13

The participants emphasized the importance of broadening the discussion about PC in graduation, stressing the potential of the theme to deconstruct strictly biologist perceptions and add criticality and humanization to training. This placement is in line with what the curriculum guidelines for Nutrition courses recommend 5 and brings up the discussion on health education in Brazil. Humanization and criticality are critical of us in this discussion. In Nutrition courses, subjects in the biomedical and technological area predominate in the curriculum, while those in the social and human sphere represent a smaller fraction

of the workload. 6

An initial path to favor training in PC would be the creation of optional subjects. Such meetings would not necessarily reach all enrolled students, but they can offer an approximation for those who experience them, expanding the theoretical-practical training in the area. In addition, optional subjects are usually malleable with regard to integrating professors and students from different courses, which would favor the interdisciplinary and interprofessional character expected in PC work. 1

Respondents in this study mentioned challenges related to the role of nutritionists in health teams, citing the feeling of impotence, supporting role and lack of involvement among the team. Such difficulties may be related to the professional identity of the nutritionist, which is still under construction and involves a process of seeking professional autonomy. 14

Another study also concluded that nurses from a multidisciplinary PC team face difficulties in performing such practices due to lack of training and little discussion about the theme in hospital spaces, with other team members. 15 Specifically in PC, the joint and harmonious action of different professionals is essential, in order to allow members to communicate and that each one can effectively contribute, within their area of expertise, to the comprehensive care of patients. 16 As it is a welcoming approach for nutritionists, it can be a field of prominence for professionals.

CONCLUSION

It was possible to observe weaknesses in PC training of the investigated students, which are correlated with general gaps in nutrition and health training in Brazil. Therefore, it is suggested to think about curricular reformulations, mainly in the sense of adding to the biomedical training deepening about the humanization of work processes and the performance in a multidisciplinary team, in addition to the incorporation of reflections and specific contents about PC.

It is expected to deepen and naturalize

the discussions about terminality of life in higher education in health in the country, and it should seek to improve professional

performance in PC, favoring the human potential of each in caring for the other who suffers.

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