



THE NURSING INTERNS' WORKFORCE IN A TEACHING HOSPITAL
A FORÇA DE TRABALHO DE ESTAGIÁRIOS DE ENFERMAGEM EM UM HOSPITAL DE ENSINO
LA FUERZA DE TRABAJO DE INTERNOS DE ENFERMEIRA EN UN HOSPITAL ESCUELA

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ABSTRACT

Objective: analyze the contribution of activities performed by high school nursing scholarship holders in the workforce of a teaching hospital. **Method:** analytical study, with a qualitative approach, using the oral history technique for data collection and thematic analysis. The interviews were conducted with 105 scholarship holders in Natal, Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil. **Results:** the empirical categories set were: scholarship holders' workforce; scholarship holders' working hours and working conditions; and scholarship holders' precarious labor. The accounts showed there is a major contribution by high school nursing scholarship holders' workforce in the institution under study. **Conclusion:** there are a significant number of scholarship holders in the workforce of the institution under study; besides, they undergo a precarious employment contract. **Descriptors:** Scholarships and Internships; Work; Workforce; Teaching Hospitals; Nursing Staff, Hospital.

RESUMO

Objetivo: analisar a contribuição das atividades desenvolvidas pelos bolsistas de nível médio de enfermagem na força de trabalho de um hospital de ensino. **Método:** estudo analítico, com abordagem qualitativa, com a utilização da técnica da história oral para a coleta de dados e análise temática. Foram entrevistados 105 bolsistas em Natal (RN). **Resultados:** definiram-se as categorias empíricas: força de trabalho dos bolsistas; jornada e condições de trabalho dos bolsistas; e precarização do trabalho dos bolsistas. Constatou-se nas falas que há importante contribuição da força de trabalho de bolsistas de nível médio de enfermagem na instituição pesquisada. **Conclusão:** há uma parcela significativa de bolsistas na força de trabalho da instituição pesquisada; além disso, estão submetidos a um contrato precarizado de trabalho. **Descritores:** Bolsas E Estágios; Trabalho; Força de Trabalho; Hospitais de Ensino; Recursos Humanos de Enfermagem no Hospital.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: analizar la contribución de las actividades realizadas por los becarios de nivel secundario de enfermería en la fuerza de trabajo de un hospital escuela. **Método:** estudio analítico, con un abordaje cualitativo, utilizando la técnica de la historia oral para la recogida de datos y el análisis temático. Las entrevistas se llevaron a cabo con 105 becarios en Natal, Río Grande del Norte, Brasil. **Resultados:** las categorías empíricas establecidas fueron: fuerza de trabajo de becarios; horas de trabajo y condiciones de trabajo de becarios; y trabajo precario de becarios. Los relatos mostraron que hay una importante contribución de la fuerza de trabajo de los becarios de nivel secundario de enfermería en la institución en estudio. **Conclusión:** hay una porción significativa de becarios en la fuerza de trabajo de la institución en estudio; además, se someten a un contrato de trabajo precario. **Descriptor:** Becas y Pasantías; Trabajo; Fuerza de Trabajo; Hospitales Escuela; Personal de Enfermería en Hospital.

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INTRODUCTION

Internship is a part of the pedagogical project of a course, along with interconnecting the student's education process, according to Law 11.788, enacted on September 25, 2008, aimed at developing a student to civic life and work.¹

As for those participating in non-compulsory internships, they may be granted a monthly scholarship, to cover a part of their school and personal expenses, which should be paid by the company where the student is pursuing her/his internship or through integration agents (IA), who may even suggest the scholarship value.²

In the context of this study, we chose to study the insertion of high school nursing interns in university hospitals (UHs), a reference health care environment in terms of high complexity, health professionals' training, and technological development, from a perspective of inclusion and integration, a network, within health services, meeting the criteria of population needs, which strengthens the guidelines of the Brazilian National Health System (SUS).

Regarding the education of human resources for health care, the UH is, par excellence, one of the practical scenarios where the teaching/service relation takes place. Because it is a permanent institution of the university itself, this is the scenario providing students with more opportunities and learning experiences. Such opportunities occur through the work of professors, interns, and professionals who pursue their work activities in the institution.

The fact of having a rather qualified staff or a larger number of physical resources and equipment does not necessarily lead the UHs to provide better medical care. Experience has shown that the UHs, despite resorting to more human and physical resources, do not meet, in many cases, the expected needs, i.e. according to their standards.³ This situation is particularly serious, because failure to comply with quality standards and appropriate medical management may negatively mark the intern throughout her/his career.

The new advances in technology have led to consequences both for working conditions and for the worker's lifestyle. The 1980s are marked by great technological advancement, where automation, robotics, and microelectronics entered the manufacturing universe, participating in and growing within labor relations and capital production.⁴ Production decentralization and changes in

the labor management ways, coupled with technological advancement, have reached all production sectors in the society.⁵ The provision of nursing care has faced a big dichotomy. On the one hand, there are increasing complexity of health services, numerous treatment recommendations, and new technologies, and on the other there are efforts by the institutions to decrease costs and reduce the length of patients' hospital stay.⁶

A factor related to the current labor world is the use, by most companies, of paid interns, which means a veiled form of precarious labor, advocated through the illusory discourse of contribution to the learning process and income generation for high school students or graduates.

In relation to nursing care in public institutions, generally it has been affected by poor human resources when replacing professionals by interns, as there is a large turnover of scholarship holders, which may interfere with the quality of care provided to the population. Thus, this study aims to analyze the contribution of activities performed by high school nursing scholarship holders in the workforce of a teaching hospital.

METHOD

This study was extracted from the dissertation "**Analysis of the contribution of trainees remunerated in the force of work in nursing.**" Analytical study, with a qualitative approach, using thematic oral history, having in mind that accounts and historical experience building of high school nursing scholarship holders, study participants, enable grasping the implications on their lives.

The research participants consisted in high school educated nursing professionals, nursing technicians (n = 105), who met the inclusion criteria: paid scholarship holders, who were at the teaching hospital at the time of collection, particularly during the shift work when they pursued work activities, in the sectors of Intensive Care Unit, Surgical Center, Transplantation, Hemodynamics, and Wards, on the hospital ground floor and at the mixed sector, including Neurology.

Complying with the Resolution 466/2012, from the Brazilian National Health Council, this research was authorized by the direction of the institution under study and subsequently submitted to the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN), which granted

approval through the Opinion 270/2008 and the Certificate of Submission for Ethical Assessment (CAAE) 0100.0.051.000-08. Through prior contact to the participants, information collection began, which was accomplished by means of an open interview, with generating questions. A notebook was used to record all explicit and/or implicit observations during the research process.⁷ For obtaining the accounts, we used a standard MP4 audio and video recorder.

Respondents were grouped and coded by using the name of Brazilian ants, such as: *cabaça*, *saúva*, *caiapó*, *novato*, *aborícola*, *faraó*, *pixixica*. For addressing the speeches of high school nursing interns, who pursue their working activities at the day and night shifts in a public hospital in Natal, Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil, we used thematic analysis, which consists in a set of relations and It may be graphically represented by a word, a sentence, or a summary. Therefore, conducting a thematic analysis consists in finding the meaning units that make up a communication, whose presence or frequency has a particular significance for the analytical aim.⁸

In order to operationalize the use of thematic analysis, as recommended by the literature⁸, we started from the theoretical framework discussed in this study for a pre-analysis, with a brief reading of testimonies, towards obtaining a comprehensive contact to the material to grasp the central ideas of statements. Then, the corpus was gathered and, at that time, the interviews were grouped according to their common features. Subsequently, the corpus underwent a text subdivision into record units, consisting of sentence, word, stretch, or theme.⁸

At that time, information aggregation took place, by setting the following empirical categories: scholarship holders' workforce and scholarship holders' working hours and working conditions.

RESULTS

◆ **Scholarship holders' workforce**

The workforce we intend to discuss in this category refers to that used by the institution where the research took place, replacing the high school educated nursing professionals, since a part of the sectors that constitute the hospital rely on scholarship holders as those mainly responsible for nursing care.

In the institution, there is a predominance of women, with 85.70% of the scholarship holders addressed, confirming the portion of nursing work done by women, who were aged

between 20 and 39 years.⁹ In addition, all interns who pursued their activities in the hospital had completed the nursing technician course, and this mischaracterize them as students attending professional education courses.⁹

Such care is inserted within the health field at the tertiary level of the work process and, therefore, it has, besides the production process, its social labor relations, resources and instruments. Thus, there are two distinct ways to address the issue of professionals working within the health field: as workforce and as human resources.¹⁰

Thus, as this involves the contribution of the high school nursing scholarship holders in the workforce, we intend to use the term workforce to refer to issues such as production, employment and unemployment, income, work division, workplace.

The scholarship holders pursue technical activities similar those of professionals hired by the institution under study, and they ended up taking responsibility over hospital sectors by themselves. This characterizes a huge contribution of their workforce as technical nursing workers, having in mind that the institution relies on these interns as members of its current workforce, and not just as a supplementary workforce, indispensable to the maintenance of the institution, as we can notice in the tasks fulfilled, in accordance with the speech below:

Here, when we arrive, there is the issue of assignment. Sometimes, I am on medication and often we are in charge of accompanying everyone to have a bath. A dependent patient, we provide him with more assistance, not neglecting the others. If we have a bath in bed, this is a priority, right? Then, we check the vital signs [...] At the same time, there are exams, and we accompany a patient to undergo examination. Then, you know, we check the signs and conduct an interview to know about the day of that patient, if he accepted the diet, if excretion is normal or there is any change, if he is failing to do this due to some reason, and we verify all patient complaints: then, we conclude our observations, enter information in our report, how we met that patient etc., as well as the actions we take. Okay, I think that is it! (Novato)

It is noticeable in the speech above that the presence of a scholarship holder in the institution under study means a greater representativeness in the workforce of that hospital, because the activities performed are, par excellence, duties of the daily routine of a nursing technician, becoming a

member of the workforce in the institution and, above all, bridging all of the gaps, constituting an indispensable element to work maintenance. Nursing management even states that:

[[...]] so, these interns are used by the institution as workforce, indeed, precarious labor, we know that is not right!

In this sense, the nursing management's speech translates, in short, everything that could draw attention to the importance of such work, in essence, a cry of complaint and indignation from those who, getting close to this reality, could not avoid to get involved in inadequate action. It is not possible to remain silent in face of a precarious working condition like these, consisting in a portion of the workforce within the health field, and their unfolding, which even impact the delivery of care.

Coming back to the issue of high school nursing scholarship holders' workforce, it may be inferred that the education level and the professional qualification forms, i.e. professional education, reveal that the ways how nursing technicians enter the job market within the health field are related to distortions and inequalities concerning the rights for citizenship through absence of a job, observed in the statements below:

The difficulty is great to get a job, if we do not engage in voluntary internship, we cannot work, because people do not offer opportunities to those who have no experience. We complete the course and nothing! (Cabaça)

I graduated in 2006, and I found no job. I spent a time at home, then I did the test here, in the voluntary UH, and I was approved. Then, I started as a volunteer and it took almost three months until I was granted a scholarship as intern. (Pixixica)

This reality could be observed in the survey, since the use of high school nursing scholarship holders' workforce, on the part of a public university hospital, confirms the various kinds of employment contract in the modern world, since the absence of a job constitutes the increasingly predominant context in the capitalist society.

♦ Scholarship holders' working hours and working conditions

The previous analysis category showed the insertion of scholarship holders not only as apprentices, but as workforce to replace workers with employment contract. This entails great irregularities with regard to compliance with Article 10 of Law 11,788/2008.¹ This Article states that the working day of high school professional

education students in an internship should not exceed six hours a day and 30 hours a week.¹ Through this finding in the legislation, when asked about their working hours, the scholarship holders said:

I work five days a week, six hours a day, thirty hours a week. (Caiapó)

Six hours a day, from 1 p.m. to 7 p.m., five days a week, i.e. thirty hours. (Sará-Sará)

I work twelve hours, ten nights a month. (Jequitaia)

The study demonstrated that a large portion of interns, who consist in workforce of the hospital, now as apprentices, then as technicians, are required to "double," i.e. take on a second work shift, especially when asked by the supervisor nurse due to absence of a colleague or an employee hired by the teaching institution, either through a permanent or temporary job contract.

When a colleague from the ward is absent, mainly friend in the weekend, and the nurse does not take any action, or even when we double it, when the next person does not arrive, we are required to double it to gain a day off. But an employee is not required to double it [...]. (Mossoró)

We work according to our schedule, then, when our working hours are coming to an end, then our colleague does not come [interruption] what was I saying? Okay. And that is it, indeed: if she does not come, sometimes there is no information, she does not come and does not say anything, she does not come to work and we are required to double it, i.e. we replace a colleague that does not come. I hate it. (Arborícola)

Such working day should be informed in the agreement, as it has to be compatible with school activities and not exceed six hours a day and 30 hours a week, in the case of high school professional education students. However, the speeches below demonstrate a working day over the time period established by law among the interns:

We have to double it at night, I hate this. (Colhetadeira)

In part, sometimes we work too much, indeed. I work in the afternoon, then the person working at night does not come, then we have to double it. We have to replace the person who works at night ! (Taçuira)

Working in the night shift, in this case, may be claimed as irregular in the context of interns, because this is a determinant risk factor for workers' life and health in this shift, as they are forced to double their working shift. And they refer to hate these situations by using strong words and expressions during the interviews. This is the human limit. Regarding the working conditions in the institution, the interns also mentioned:

The lack of material, you cannot do that for patients because the hospital does not have resources. This is annoying, it bothers me a lot! (Faraó)

There is an issue here related to lack of material. This stresses me a lot, because sometimes the physical structure increases the lack of material, that is it. Sometimes, we have to accompany a patient to have a bath, the patient cannot walk, then we have to take a chair, when we find a chair it is old and ugly and rusty, it is falling to pieces! I would like to be able to work, have the material, have [...] other things that I do not recall now. It does not mean that I do not want to say, I do not recall them. (Novato)

Given the speeches above, we notice where the interns have replaced the high school educated technicians' workforce. The UH, which is a reference in Northeastern Brazil, suffers from a shortage of human resources, and it also has working conditions that cause discomfort and stress among interns.

When people do not have the materials needed to provide nursing care available at the pharmacy, they have to rush to other wards in search of 'leftovers' from previous cases during situations of emergency, namely: cardiac tamponade, paper towels, cotton, antipyretics, and thermometer, key material to identify changes in patients' vital signs. The speech below illustrates this statement:

Guy, sometimes there lacks equipment. For instance, there is no thermometer, then we cannot fulfill the procedure. We to borrow it, and this takes a while [...]. (Malagueta)

Poor working conditions put the body at risk for accidents, occupational diseases, increased morbidity rates, reduced life span, among others. Concerning the working conditions, the body is affected; in work organization, the target is mental functioning.^{10,11} Poor working conditions bring harm to the body and the spirit. Inadequate working conditions faced in hospitals have been a subject of discussion since the 1940s by the International Labour Organization (ILO), which provides recommendations on hygiene and safety at the workplace.¹² Unsatisfactory conditions are related to biological, physical, chemical, psychosocial, and ergonomic factors, which can damage the health of professionals working there.

DISCUSSION

Starting from the contribution of interns to the workforce, we noticed that in the teaching hospital there are overcrowded wards, besides the lack of sufficient staff to

fulfill professional activities. Added to this, lack of material in the institution, as to perform most procedures involved in nursing care they need to go to the pharmacy with requests for materials asked by the nurses or the interns themselves, in many occasions.

It is also worth mentioning that this use of precarious labor by the institution, as reported by nursing management, has caused a decreased number of jobs for other professionals, especially nursing professionals. According to Marxist thought, labor is the ability to perform useful work that increases the value of goods, when workers sell it to the capitalist in exchange of wage in money terms.

When referring to social welfare policy, a strong State protects workers from financial crises by preventing insecurity during unemployment periods and other interruptions in their ability to work, leading the worker to maintain a livelihood. In this sense, the welfare State and job market regulation interact to determine the employment conditions in societies.¹³

Worse conditions among health workers are due to reasons related to economic and political crisis, resulting in the adoption of measures for adjustments and financial cuts in social policies, such as education, security, transportation, housing, and labor.¹⁴

The lack of jobs in contemporary capitalism is the most brutal form of changes in work setting in the modern world, as it is related to structural unemployment, by increasing precarious labor and wages within the service sector, but also to the current forms of part-time, temporary, subcontracted, outsourced labor, or linked to the informal economy, as well as many other existing forms.¹⁵

In the context of interns, we can see great dissatisfaction in the increased working hours by doubling the work shift concerned. They see themselves under a temporary employment condition, which makes it easier to the contracting institutions to use precarious workforce. Thus, in addition to labor, the institution also takes, in a way or another, a significant human physiological need: sleeping. This leads to three major consequences: fatigue, which negatively affects performance, increases the propensity for error, and can cause harm to a patient; second, the physical and mental burdens arising from work can affect interns' health; and, finally, compromised intern's performance as an apprentice.¹⁶

In a study that aimed to investigate the impact of precarious employment on working

hours, it was found that workers with no employment contract tended to work for a highly irregular number of hours, over which they had little control, with very lengthy or short daily and weekly working hours, according to organizational requirements.¹⁵

Thus, there was greater disruption to family and social life and a worse balance between work and personal life among workers with no employment contract, such as: sleep disturbance, fatigue, and unstructured diet and exercise regimes.¹⁵ Those who work in the night shift are obliged to reverse their usual sleep/wake pattern, with disordered circadian rhythm.

A survey conducted in the same city as this research found that the nursing category, which is wage-based and has low wage levels – particularly high school educated workers – undergoes various shifts, increasing its working hours in an attempt to improve remuneration.¹⁷ It was also reported that low wages are seen as insufficient in relation to workers' needs, leading them to have more than one job, increasing their exposure to risks.

Adding the working day to the night work pursued by high school nursing interns, there is an aggravating factor with regard to working conditions in the institution where the research was conducted that involves nursing care and the interns' workforce.

Considering the importance of nursing to care for people and the responsibilities in charge of scholarship holders in this context, there is a paradox between such responsibility and inadequate working conditions offered to these workers, particularly precarious.

Depending on the conditions under which the work is performed, these conditions can bring it to suffering, which arises from the clash between worker's subjectivity and constraints related to socio-cultural and environmental conditions, social relationships, and work organization.

This reflects a production mode that is, currently, characteristic of flexible accumulation of capital that has given rise to a situation that has many differences, including the relationship between labor/employment, underemployment, and unemployment.

An internship, when paid, is one of the institutes closest to an employment relationship, since it has the five requirements that characterize this, namely: work pursued by a civil person, where the internship provider is a higher education professional in need of an intern, regardless of

being a legal entity; personality, the intern is a worker who personally provides services; non-occasional basis, an intern is not an occasional worker, i.e. she/he provides services on a regular basis; burden, an intern is similar to a hired employee, therefore, she/he receives remuneration for the service provided and under the responsibility of a customer, an intern whose activity is pursued depending on others in need of it.¹⁸

The justification of this practice by institutions that hire paid interns is related to the qualification of education and training of an intern for the job market, to the detriment of labor guarantees due to failure to provide an employment contract, in order to increase internship opportunities in the job market.¹⁸

On the other hand, it is worth noticing that, when hiring interns, the institutions or companies, if such internship does not favor what is established by law, such as improvement and completion of professional academic background, it actually illustrates a fraudulent use of less costly workforce. The relationship between the company providing an internship and the intern, from a legal viewpoint, does not characterize an internship relationship, but employment.

While the extracurricular internship is regulated by the Brazilian Ministry of Education and the Brazilian Federal Nursing Council (COFEN), professionals dealing with labor issues criticize internship as a precarious work form due to the illusory relationship of contribution to the learning process for nursing students.¹⁹ For interns, in many occasions, an extracurricular internship means a possibility of learning and improvement.

CONCLUSION

Nursing technicians have adopted non-compulsory paid internship as their first job in the nursing field, and this is justified by the acquisition of professional experience, since they cannot find jobs after graduating if there is no previous work experience in their resumes.

Not relying on such a requirement, they get into the high school educated workforce in nursing within the teaching hospital, taking responsibility over the work schedules of employees, but as scholarship holders. This was demonstrated in the survey and it is directly related to the neoliberal political purpose – a phenomenon known as *productive restructuring process* – which has restricted investment in health and limited spending on civil public servants, gradually turning labor relations into precarious ones in the field

through contracts with no employment ties, few labor rights, and outsourcing.

Having the purpose of this study in mind, we notice that there is a contribution of the high school nursing scholarship workforce in the institution under analysis. Also, it was found that scholarship holders undergo, first, a precarious employment contract and, in addition to the nature of the employment contract, second, working conditions established by the institution, representing lack of human resources, materials, working conditions, as well as insertion in work shifts at night, something which is illegal.

Thus, it is worth emphasizing the importance of worker involvement in this context, since she/he must seek and strive for rather decent work, because she/he is the person who best knows her/his job. This must be done through a rather horizontal relationship between workers and managers in the institutions, which should appreciate the knowledge of this worker, by listening to what she/he has to say about the working conditions and suggestions to improve these conditions.

In the context of this study, this becomes virtually impossible, because the ties that these interns hold with the institution prevents any expression of dissatisfaction or even any claim in face of such a huge cycle of precariousness.

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