



## PERCEPTION OF NURSING STUDENTS ABOUT DEATH AND DYING: LITERATURE REVIEW

### PERCEPÇÃO DE ESTUDANTES DE ENFERMAGEM SOBRE A MORTE E O MORRER: REVISÃO DE LITERATURA

### PERCEPCIÓN DE ESTUDIANTES DE ENFERMERÍA SOBRE LA MUERTE Y EL MORIR: REVISIÓN DE LITERATURA

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#### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** to analyze the scientific literature on the perception of nursing students about the death and dying process. **Method:** this is an integrative review in which has as guiding question <<What is the perception of nursing students regarding the process of death and dying?>> Articles were selected which have been available in databases Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System Online (MEDLINE), Latin American and Caribbean Literature on Health Sciences (LILACS) and the electronic library Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), using as controlled descriptors "Education", "Death" and "Nursing" and as uncontrolled descriptor "Dying", in the period 2004-2011. Data were analyzed based on the theoretical reference of Hinds, Chaves and Cypress. **Results:** we categorized them into sub-themes which are presented in four areas: 1. the impact of death and dying in nursing care; 2. Training in thanatology and nursing; 3. Individual and cultural meanings about death and dying; 4. Death and dying in Western culture. **Conclusion:** It is necessary a greater commitment between universities and courses about the study of thanatology in nursing education. **Descriptors:** Thanatology; Death; Nursing Students.

#### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** analisar na produção científica sobre a percepção de estudantes de enfermagem quanto ao processo de morte e morrer. **Método:** revisão integrativa que teve como questão norteadora <<Qual a percepção dos estudantes de enfermagem em relação ao processo da morte e do morrer? >> Foram selecionados artigos disponíveis nas bases de dados Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System Online (MEDLINE), Literatura Latino-Americana e do Caribe em Ciências da Saúde (LILACS) e na biblioteca eletrônica Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), utilizando como descritores controlados "Educação", "Morte" e "Enfermagem" e o não controlado "Morrer", no período de 2004 a 2011. Os dados foram analisados com base no referencial teórico de Hinds, Chaves e Cypress. **Resultados:** foram categorizados em subtemas, apresentados em quatro eixos: 1. Impacto da morte e do morrer na assistência de enfermagem; 2. Formação em tanatologia e enfermagem, 3. Significados individuais e culturais a respeito da morte e do morrer, 4. Morte e morrer na cultura ocidental. **Conclusão:** é necessário maior compromisso por parte dos cursos e universidades quanto ao estudo da Tanatologia na formação do enfermeiro. **Descritores:** Tanatologia; Morte; Estudantes de Enfermagem.

#### RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** analizar en la producción científica sobre la percepción de estudiantes de enfermería sobre al proceso de muerte y morir. **Método:** revisión integrativa que tuvo como pregunta guiadora <<¿Cuál es la percepción de los estudiantes de enfermería en relación al proceso de la muerte y del morir? >> Fueron seleccionados artículos disponibles en las bases de datos Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System Online (MEDLINE), Literatura Latino-Americana y del Caribe en Ciencias de la Salud (LILACS) y en la biblioteca electrónica Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), utilizando como descriptores controlados "Educación", "Muerte" y "Enfermería" y el no controlado "Morir", en el período de 2004 a 2011. Los datos fueron analizados con base en el referencial teórico de Hinds, Chaves y Cypress. **Resultados:** fueron categorizados en subtemas, presentados en cuatro ejes: 1. Impacto de la muerte y del morir en la asistencia de enfermería; 2. Formación en tanatología y enfermería, 3. Significados individuales y culturales a respecto de la muerte y del morir, 4. Muerte y morir en la cultura occidental. **Conclusión:** es necesario mayor compromiso por parte de los cursos y universidades sobre el estudio de la Tanatología en la formación del enfermero. **Descritores:** Tanatología; Muerte; Estudiantes de Enfermería.

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## INTRODUCTION

Death may have a biological concept such as the cessation of heartbeat, respiration, or the electrical activity of the brain, and these definitions are well studied in universities. However, this concept is directly linked to other larger ones, such as social, rather complex cultural and historical development, and it is in constant metamorphosis. This concept resonates in changing in individual and group behavior in society.

It is important and necessary to consider the historical transformations that society has with regard to attitudes toward death. Death lived with preparation and tranquility, until the moment that turned into fear and distress as in the present days.<sup>1</sup>

Every human being has a very particular vision of that moment, but it will depend on how the individual lived his life and the way the situation of death have been presented and permeated in the culture, the traditions, concepts and present values, associated with the way they are, of loving and perceiving life, which makes this extremely relative understanding.<sup>2</sup>

For health professionals death is a constant, and they have faced with it almost daily. This professional, a finite being like everyone, faces the same existential dilemmas when faced with human loss. No other health professional lives so close and so often with death as nursing professionals, since they spend most of the time with whom is hospitalized, but they are still unprepared to deal with the death.<sup>3</sup>

The teaching in health area reinforces the technical and scientific training centered in biologicism, providing a little or no space to address the spiritual, emotional and social aspects of the human being, and death is related to defeat, loss and frustration.<sup>4</sup>

It is observed that the unpreparedness towards these professionals with regard to the issue of death happens before the training, starting in their family environment, where it is forbidden to talk about death and where there is a natural tendency to hide. In nursing education, there is commonly an attention to the techniques of prolongation of life and the hope of recovery without equivalence in attention to provide comfort to those who will die.

How can we raise awareness among nursing students for the study about death? For this, it is necessary to learn their perception about the process of death and dying.

Education institutions need to rethink the strategies and priorities for the training of professionals who will take care of a rapidly growing population and demand health services to meet their needs.<sup>5</sup> Studying the process of death and dying can be a way of humanizing allowing a differentiated care, an action with more security and more effective participation in caring and sensitive.

## OBJECTIVE

- To analyze the scientific literature on the perception of nursing students about the death and dying process.

## METHOD

This is an integrative review, research method that determines the current knowledge on specific subject and presents the synthesis of multiple published studies.<sup>6</sup> Thus, it is aimed to collate and synthesize research results in relation to a certain topic in an orderly and synthesized form, contributing to the construction of knowledge of the subject investigated.

The preparation of this study started from the following guiding question <<What is the perception of nursing students regarding the process of death and dying? >>

The study was conducted by surveying the available literature databases: Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System Online (MEDLINE), Latin American and Caribbean Literature on Health Sciences (LILACS) and electronic library Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) using controlled descriptors such as "Education", "Death" and "Nursing" and the uncontrolled descriptor is "Dying".

The articles selected met the following criteria: they were published in the Portuguese language, they're available in full and entered into the period of publication: from March 2004 to March 2011. With the crossing of descriptors, 35 articles were found, 7 of which were complete.

Then the articles were analyzed based on the theoretical framework of Hinds, Chaves and Cypress and classified in four contextual levels. The first, the immediate, experienced at the present time and now, describes the impact of death and dying in nursing care. In the specific context, in the second level the reference is made to the individual's point of view, considering the main peculiarities of the training in thanatology aspects, inserted in the general context and the framework of the individual's life; and the third level we analyzed the individual and cultural meanings

about death and dying. Regarding meta-context presented at the fourth level of analysis, we can perceive the social construction of an attitude that is shared by perception of death as a hidden phenomenon in Western culture.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results were categorized into sub-themes which are presented in four areas: the impact of death and dying in nursing care, and nursing training in thanatology, individual and cultural meanings about death and dying, death and dying in Western culture.

### ◆ The impact of death and dying in nursing care

Constantly health professionals are exposed to moments of confrontation on death of those under their care. The nursing staff, in particular, whose presence is more constant and near the patient thinks it's difficult to face this moment because they consider as a result of treatment failure, since their training is focused on preserving life.<sup>9</sup>

Studies show that even the most experienced professionals, both in teaching and in nursing care, face various sensations, such as distress, anxiety, frustration and depression, as well as they do not know how to deal with death, they feel helpless to address this issue. The professor shows as even more uncomfortable with death when they're next to the student, because he needs to support his own anguish while have to support and teach students about the process of death.<sup>8, 10 to 11</sup>

Nursing students have the opportunity to develop internships practice and to be prepared for the process of death and dying. However, this issue is rarely addressed during graduation, helping individuals to be placed in immature labor market and without the preparation to deal with death situations.<sup>12</sup>

Research conducted with undergraduate students in nursing show the insecurity and lack of preparation to deal with the process of death and dying. In a way, this stems from an organized curriculum in order to teach the constant struggle for life and health recovery, being focused primarily on technical procedures.<sup>13-14</sup>

The emergence of new technologies and scientific advances strengthen the chances of success in therapy and hope for healing. However, in circumstances where death is inevitable, the nurse often feels as she is not prepared to move away from the patient; forgets that this patient is far from family and social life, looking at his hospital the

deathbed. The care in this situation includes several activities, among which we mention: the affection, understanding and also to provide protection for the individual to die peaceful.<sup>11,15</sup>

The death situation causes a strong impact on student nurse, not only because of the preparation of the body, but also to witness the suffering of the family, which is at a critical time of loss. Death causes powerlessness and generates emotions that can interfere with the care given to the human being and assistance shall be judged and questioned by the patient's family.<sup>9,15</sup>

As refuge, when in dying and death process, nursing professionals are restricted to technical procedures, such as changing position, hygienic care and medication administration; beyond bureaucratic activities, mechanical situations. This situation hinders the provision of quality care, which can lead to the patient the feeling of loneliness and abandonment, and the graduate student loses the opportunity to deal with ethical and emotional aspects, focusing, for the most part, in disease.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, it is extremely important that universities insert in their schedule teaching the approach of the process of dying and death by using interactive, theoretical/practical methodologies, so that the student may have a more active and focused participation in aspects of facing death, being near the patient. Thus, it will be possible the training of future nurses who know to face the situations of finitude, which will be exposed in their daily

### ◆ The training in thanatology aspects and nursing

The term thanatology comes from the Greek *thánatos*, which represents the god of death in Greek mythology, and *logy* means study. So thanatology would be the study of death, or the science of death, but thanatology learning should not be restricted to those who intend to pursue it formally as principal activity.<sup>16</sup> It is essential for any professional who wants to improve their performance, as to provide personal growth.

The thematic study of death and dying has been performed in a superficial and rapid manner during the training of nurses, and there is not, in most courses, a formal discipline for this discussion. A researcher, a pioneer in conducting these studies, states that facing this time is more difficult for those who care than for those who die. She still argues that the professional who takes care of someone on the verge of death should

thoroughly review his position on death so they can sit quiet and without anxiety near the patient.<sup>17</sup>

The spaces for discussion and reflection so that they can refer the student to a clearer understanding about death are still scarce.<sup>15</sup> In this context, the development of the discipline of thanatology allows the student the first contact with the themes of death, theoretical/reflective way, giving a unique opportunity for professional training.

#### ◆ The individual and cultural meanings about death and dying

From a philosophical standpoint, death can be seen as inherent to the living condition and their consciousness, inherent in human beings. It is an event that completes life, but it has been very difficult to understand and address it as we separate life and death.<sup>18</sup>

Nowadays, death has the image of isolation, suffering and pain. It's not death itself that arouses fear, but the early visualization of death at the thought of living. The fear related to death also encompasses the fear of suffering, hospitalization, being alone or losing the loved person.<sup>14,19</sup>

The reaction of each person varies according to their culture. Many people find comfort in the belief that death is the passage of the material plane to the spiritual, thus establishing itself as a moment of transition. However, death is often associated with a feeling of loss, which is experienced not only by family but also by the nursing professional, who provides directly patient care in the process of disease.<sup>14,20</sup>

In student-patient relationship is common emotional engagement during daily care practice, which arouses expectations about death and dying, what may lead, in many situations, the denial of death in the hospital setting and the feeling of sadness, depression and suffering during the preparation of the body. In addition, the student is faced with the conflict of how to position themselves on the suffering and pain of loss, a process that favors emotional overload, anxiety and depression.<sup>12,20</sup>

Before the death process, the patient can handle the phases of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, which can also be experienced by nursing professionals, since this happens to think about their own process of finitude. With undergraduate student in nursing is not different, because this is a new experience, mysterious and impactful event, and this professional accompanies the patient and is

centered on the maintenance and recovery of life.<sup>15</sup>

#### ◆ Death and Dying in the Western Culture

Some authors report that death in the West is constantly connected to the supernatural aspects and it is regarded as a punishment and pain, what difficult its approach.<sup>10</sup> The phenomenon of death happens not only in physical and biological way of the body. In it there is an interactional gap between those who are close to people who are dying and the society around.<sup>17</sup>

Death for many centuries was part of the daily life of men in a natural way. Currently the process of dying is seen as an obstacle to productive power of society because the patient loses his ability to work and produce wealth, going to face anguish and suffering. Thus, death is surrounded by taboo, being transferred from social living environment for the hospital environment, becoming in an isolated process, distant, unwanted and therefore difficult to be addressed and accepted.<sup>10-1</sup>

To be tied to the meaning of finitude and punishment, death is regarded by students of undergraduate nursing as a form of human suffering and therefore they are dominated by fear, uncertainty and insecurity that need to be discussed to facilitate the expression of feelings about question. However, this approach becomes complex and challenging, as nursing professors are fruit of a training culture in which death also had superficial approach, with behavior aimed at technical actions.<sup>12</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Addressing the theme of dying and death demands a profound reflection in order to need to change the view of care as a way not only to preserve the life process. The holistic view, which forms one of the pillars of nursing, must encompass the human being also in the process of death, a stage that is part of the life cycle and therefore should be seen as natural and acceptable.

Thus, it is important that a change in the curriculum component of the undergraduate nursing occurs. It is necessary to put more emphasis on ethical and emotional aspects of dying and death process, so that the student acquires critical and reflective capacity and learn to deal with death in a humane way, since their formation, enabling the acquisition of knowledge and ripening time.

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