Objective: to know the perception of higher-level professionals of a university hospital about the occupational image of the nursing professional. **Method**: this is a descriptive and exploratory study, with qualitative approach, with 14 nurses of a university hospital situated in the extreme south of Brazil. The data were produced by means of semi-structured interviews recorded, transcribed and analyzed through discursive textual analysis. The project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee, under the Opinion nº 21/2011. **Results**: After analysis, two categories emerged “The nursing professional as the greatest expression of care” and “Environmental relations that permeate the occupational image of the nursing professional”. **Conclusion**: It is necessary to work the occupational image of the nursing professional to foster the strengthening of this profession and appreciate its visibility. **Descriptors**: Health Staff; Professional Role of Nursing; Nursing.

RESUMEN Objetivo: conocer la percepción de los profesionales de nivel superior de un hospital universitario sobre la imagen profesional de la enfermera. **Método**: estudio exploratorio y descriptivo, de enfoque cualitativo, con 14 enfermeros (as) de un hospital universitario ubicado en el extremo sur de Brasil. Los datos fueron producidos a través de entrevistas semiestructuradas grabadas, transcritas y analizadas mediante análisis textual discursiva. El proyecto fue aprobado por el Comité de Ética Em Pesquisa, sob el Parecer nº 21/2011. **Resultados**: tras la análisis, emergieron dos categorías “La enfermera como expresión máxima del cuidado” y “Relaciones socioambientales que impregnan la imagen profesional de la enfermera”. **Conclusion**: es necesario trabajar a imagen profesional de la enfermera para favorecer el fortalecimiento de la profesión y valorizar a su visibilidad. **Descripores**: Pessoal de Saúde; Papel do Profissional de Enfermagem; Enfermagem.

ABSTRACT

**METHOD**

This is a descriptive and exploratory study, with a qualitative approach, with 14 nurses of a university hospital situated in the extreme south of Brazil. The data were produced by means of semi-structured interviews recorded, transcribed and analyzed through discursive textual analysis. The project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee, under the Opinion nº 21/2011.

**RESULTS**

After analysis, two categories emerged: “The nursing professional as the greatest expression of care” and “Environmental relations that permeate the occupational image of the nursing professional”.

**CONCLUSION**

It is necessary to work the occupational image of the nursing professional to foster the strengthening of this profession and appreciate its visibility.

**Descriptors**: Health Staff; Professional Role of Nursing; Nursing.

**RESUMEN**

Objective: to know the perception of the professionals of level superior of a university hospital about the image professional of the nurse. **Método**: estudio exploratorio and descriptive, of qualitative approach, with 14 nurses (as) of a university university located in the extreme south of Brazil. The data were produced through semi-structured interviews recorded, transcribed and analyzed through textual discursive analysis. The project was approved by the Ethics Committee of Research, in accordance with the Decree nº 21/2011. **Resultados**: after the analysis, two categories emerged: “The nurse as the maximum expression of care” and “Environmental relations that impregnate the occupational image of the nurse”. **Conclusion**: is necessary to work the professional image of the nurse to favor the strengthening of the profession and its visibility.

**Descripores**: Personal Sanitario; Rol Profesional de la Enfermeria; Enfermeria.
The occupational image of the nursing professional drives us to the very identity of this practitioner, in its intertwined network of exclusive meanings and, therefore, inherent to the profession, which are anchored on historical remnants, and on other social and political components, which give support to the social role established for nurses today.\(^1\)\(^2\)

One can state that the nursing profession has evolved over the years, as well as its scientificty, but the figure of the nursing professional still faces challenges that are reconfigured over time, without being completely exceeded, when we take the lack of social recognition, the low income, the impairment of social life (because of full dedication to this profession), the little professional autonomy, the reference to the sensuality as sex symbol, as examples, in addition to the derogatory images, often, transmitted by the media.\(^2\)\(^5\)

These facts demonstrate the existence of a misguided notion about the nursing professional, in the various ways in which the nurse has been publicly represented, often, based on stereotypes, which highlight the lack of knowledge of its work and assignments, or even a derogatory pre-conception in relation to this profession. Such aspects significantly reflect on the image of the nursing professional nowadays, by provoking misunderstandings and making it even more difficult to define an occupational image.\(^3\)

It is known that the image of any professional category in the social context might be related to power, appreciation, recognition and status. What society expresses about the practitioner is just as significant as what it is; a negative image might hamper the development and evolution of the profession, as well as its consequent social recognition.\(^2\)

Hence, it is important to emphasize that there are notable changes in the spaces for operation and in the conception of knowledge and subject in the current scenario of nursing.\(^6\) We can understand that the image of the current situation the profession in question is a result of the occupational relationships, the vocational training, the insertion into the labor market and of a social and cultural reality built, therefore likely to suffer changes with regard to negative aspects.\(^7\)

The formation of this image should be problematized in order to allow the clarification and the development of nursing, so that it can be observed by means of a perspective of renewal and creation, by eliminating founding myths.\(^6\)

The nursing professional is responsible for disseminating its image in a positive way. Accordingly, it should invest more in its personal marketing, through the disclosure of its practices. Nurses are always seeking to innovate in their actions, but rarely disclose the results of their actions, leading to a low disclosure of their work and consequent invisibility of the practice of the profession.\(^8\)

Therefore, the profession has a deep interest to keep the investigations about the ways in which the nurse is or has been depicted.\(^8\)

In the literature, there are few studies related to the perceptions of higher-level professionals who work in hospital institutions about the occupational image of the nursing professional, which justifies the accomplishment of this study. Accordingly, when reflecting on the production of current knowledge and achievements of nursing referring to the occupational image of nurses, the research problem is the lack of understanding concerning the perception of higher-level professionals about the occupational image of the nursing professional.

Knowing the perception of higher-level professionals referring to the occupational image of the nursing professional might contribute to a better assessment of possible weaknesses of the profession in question, which might go unnoticed by the professionals themselves because they are often linked to their daily tasks. Such knowledge might contribute to the elaboration of strategies that guide the appreciation and visibility of the nursing professional in its different dimensions, which demonstrates the relevance of this study.

Thus, this study has the following objective:

- To know the perception of higher-level professionals of a university hospital about the occupational image of the nursing professional.

This is a descriptive and exploratory study, with qualitative approach, conducted at a university hospital situated in the extreme south of Brazil that, in addition to educational and care services, conducts health actions through continuous programs that seek to associate teaching, research and extension with a provision of qualified health services, primarily directed to users of the Brazilian Unified Health System (SUS, as per its acronym in Portuguese).
The research subjects were 14 higher-level professionals who worked in the respective hospital, selected by non-probability convenience sampling. The inclusion criteria were restricted to: being a higher-level professional in the respective university hospital, having working contacts with nursing professionals, having availability and interest in participating in the research. The exclusion criteria were restricted to: being a nurse, not being higher-level professional and not having availability or interest in participating in the research.

The data production took place in the period between July 2012 and January 2013, the instruments used were semi-structured interviews recorded on audio, subsequently transcribed, focusing on the occupational image of the nursing professional.

The interviews were conducted in an environment separated from the area of operation of each professional, previously scheduled, after the demonstration of the research objective and signature of the Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF). The testimonies of the study subjects were identified by means of the letter “P” (professional), followed by a sequential number.

The data analysis was conducted by means of Textual Discourse Analysis, which has four steps. The process began with the reading of the collected material, with the aim to accomplish the unitarization of data, which implies examining the materials in their details, by fragmenting them in order to achieve units resulting from empirical and theoretical dialogues. Next, the process called categorization was performed, with the aim to build relations among the units of base, by combining them and ranking them in order to understand how these unit elements could be assembled in the formation of more complex sets, the categories.

With exhaustive impregnation in the materials of analysis, triggered by the previous two stages, the conduction the third stage took place, which was called capture of a new emergent. This step consists in investing in the communication of a new understanding, as well as its criticism and validation. Finally, there was the process of self-organization, through which new understandings have emerged.

The ethical aspects were respected in their entirety, and the project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee in the Health Area of the Federal University of Rio Grande (Opinion nº 21/2011).

RESULTS

The characterization of the 14 interviewed subjects highlighted that the age ranged from 24 to 59 years; 12 were women; the operation time at the institution ranged from one to ten years. Regarding the professional category, two social workers, two physiotherapists, one pharmacist, one nutritionist, one physical educator, two psychologists, four physicians and one bachelor’s degree in Literature were interviewed. Furthermore, one should highlight that eight interviewed professionals completed, in addition to the graduation, post-graduation courses.

From the data analysis, two categories related to perceptions of higher-level professionals on the occupational image of the nursing professional were built: “The nursing professional as the greatest expression of care” and “Environmental relations that permeate the occupational image of the nursing professional”.

The nursing professional as the greatest expression of care

The nursing professional was assessed by higher-level professionals as an essential and competent professional to provide direct and indirect care to patients, since it is in constant time within the work units and, often, advocates for the rights and interests of the patient. Accordingly, the nursing professional was highlighted as a practitioner who develops a comprehensive care, keeps up the continuity of care and is responsible for the nursing team and the communication among other professionals.

Without the nursing professional, there is no health care, it is the front line and is close to the patient, it provides the care actions, is there at the time in which the patient needs. (P1); without the presence of the nurse, we would not have continuity in patient care. (P7); If the patient has problems in communicating with the team, the nurse is the one who works along with patients. (P2)

Coupled with health practices, the theoretical and practical knowledge shared among nurses and higher-level professionals was reported as a positive point by the majority of the interviewers.

The exchange of knowledge is very cool; it is very gratifying to work together with nurses. (P8)

In addition, the occupational image of the nursing professional was compared to functions of vital organs and senses of the human body, due to its importance in the working environment.
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The role of the nursing professional, I think it is the heart of a hospital. (P5)

The nursing professional is equivalent to our eyes within the hospital. (P3)

Furthermore, the occupational image of the nursing professional was coupled with the developed health education and the potential to establish bonds with patients, which is essential so that they have adherence to the treatment. With that in mind, many professionals have reported the interdependence of their professions in relation to the work of nurses so that they can conduct their activities: the role of the nursing professional is the direct contact with the patient.

[...] thus, the patient can adhere to the best treatment. (P6)

We prescribe a medication and can rest assured about that, because we know that they will administer medications with safety and in the correct dosages. (P11)

There is no health care without the presence of the nursing professional. (P1)

Environmental relations that permeate the occupational image of the nursing professional

The occupational image of the nursing professional also seemed to be coupled with the work organization, because more structured units, with greater availability of equipment and materials, and professionals in adequate amount, seem to lead to a more positive occupational image.

In the best structured unit, there are better conditions to care for the patients, the nurse can work. (P1)

In the emergency service, there are many patients to be cared, so the nurse works according to the conditions of the institution. (P8)

It is very difficult to perform a quality care where there is no space, materials and mainly a significant amount of professionals to meet the large demand that the hospital receives. (P7)

Nevertheless, the occupational image of the nursing professional can assume a negative vision when the heavy workload of everyday life hinders the accomplishment of a quality care and the communication with other professionals who work in the institution. Accordingly, nurses often fail to perform their main assignments.

There (unit), all nursing professionals are overburdened. (P14)

There are things we hear from patients, examples like lack of a medication, which was not administered, then we ask ourselves: wasn’t it informed during the duty? (P4)

Occupational image of the nursing professional...

Sometimes, nurses leave out the quality care that we can propose even with the few conditions offered by the institution, because there is no effective communication among professionals. (P7)

Furthermore, the image of the nursing professional was coupled with the administrative functions of the work unit:

Nursing has a very important role, such as leadership positions and the managerial staff of the unit. In the administrative area, for example, organizing a nursing station, material, schedules, if I have a good nursing team, everything works fine. (P6)

The organization of the units directly affects the occupational image of the nursing professional, since it needs to perform its activities, manage its team, provide care to patients and keep up an effective communication with the services of nutrition, laboratory and sanitation, among others. Thus, if the units of work have a nursing professional responsible, committed to its assignments, its team and its patients, they are units that provide quality care.

The job of the nursing professional is pretty important for carrying out a quality care, and the nurse is the mirror for its team. (P12)

Nurses have their assignments to conduct and their teams to manage, and no professional, no matter how much he is graduated, does what a nurse does. (P13)

I think it’s essential that nurses have a critical gaze for making things work fine. (P6)

Nonetheless, it was possible to perceive that vocational training directly influences the occupational image of the nursing professional, since there is often a lack of motivation to seek updating courses, which can compromise the quality of nursing care.

I understand that nurses are overburdened, there is a lack of professionals to help in care shares, but they have to update themselves. (P9)

**DISCUSSION**

In this study, the perceptions about the occupational image of the nursing professional seem to be associated with the interdependence of professions in relation to the nursing, the knowledge exchange, the full care of users, the potential to establish bonds, the role of educator and advocate of knowledge exchange, the full care of patients, of continuity, competence and other vital functions to the operation of the institution. Thus, in this study, the nursing professional is seen as an essential practitioner in the hospital context and, mainly, in the direct and indirect care of
users. According to a study performed with nursing professionals, the role of nurse, ruled by scientific knowledge, is appreciated and recognized when it enables respect among health professionals and reliability among teams.

There is the need to emphasize that the perceptions of higher-level professionals about the occupational image of the nursing professional can vary according to the personal characteristics of the professionals and the relationships developed by them, as well as by issues attached to the environments in which the health practices are established. In this sense, thinking about professional practice of nurses involves, on the one hand, knowledge associated to social, economic and political macro-spaces, and, on the other hand, to micro-spaces in which the relationship/interaction nurse-patient and nurse-health professionals takes place.

Hence, the occupational image of the nursing professional can be associated to the social and environmental conditions in which the health practices and the work organization are developed, because the interviewees have reported that activities are performed with highest quality by nurses who work in certain sectors of the hospital, which have a satisfactory physical and professional structure. In relation to units with more precarious working conditions, nurses have to do their utmost in order to provide a quality care.

The working environment is everything that is related to physical, chemical, biological and environmental conditions that can produce conditioning factors on the activities of workers. Hence, when one discusses about working conditions, it is not only refers to the physical conditions (heat, loudness, stance, lighting, etc.), but also to the social conditions of work, social life, earnings and prospects of workers.

In light of the foregoing, the characteristics of the working environment affect the qualities of the provided services in a meaningful way. That is why a workplace must have structural elements that contribute to make it, above all, a healthy and enjoyable, thereby providing maximum protection for materials or subjective factors.

Consequently, in the context of social and environmental relations of the working environment, it was observed the interweaving of the difficulties of communication, the heavy workload of nursing, problems in the work organization and the lack of professional updating. The work of the Brazilian nursing is often conducted under precarious conditions of human and material resources, low wages and unsanitary environment, being divided by tasks and with extensive hours devoted to a charge that, in most cases, does not even offer a suitable place for resting, which hampers the exercise of nursing in its fullness.

Nonetheless, when the objective is to become visible to the other, personally or professionally, it is assumed that nursing professionals are aware of their verbal and non-verbal interactions, by seeking to communicate the message that they want to convey with clarity and objectivity. Thus, one should highlight the importance of collaborative spirit, of respect, of capacity for dialogue and, finally, of exchange of experiences and information among the teams involved in the care of the patient directly or indirectly, with the purpose of providing an environment based on the support and building of a more ethical and trusting multidisciplinary relationship, thereby promoting the visibility of the occupational image of the nursing professional in the eyes of other professionals.

It was found that the active higher-level professionals who work in hospital institutions assess the work of the nursing professional as essential in the hospital context. Nonetheless, several conditions related to environment and work organization can be potentially favorable or unfavorable to its occupational image.

One should highlight the need to rethink, from the practice and the specific knowledge of nursing, about what professional identity has been built by the nursing professional over time, by emphasizing, at the present time, the unique experience of making critical analyzes of the entire process of building the profession itself, thereby allowing us to achieve a less simplistic vision of the links between past, present and future.

This study was limited by its accomplishment in a single hospital institution with its characteristics typical of a public hospital, and it has excluded, in addition to private and philanthropic institutions, the primary network and other places of operation of nursing. The verification of the occupational image of the nursing professional in a more comprehensive way must overcome the walls of the hospital network, thereby encompassing other contexts that allow assembling a large mosaic relating to the occupational image of the nursing professional.
professional, resulting in potentialities for this profession.

Therefore, it is of utmost importance that people research on the occupational image of the nursing professional to foster the strengthening of this profession, through the demystification of taboos and stereotypes, and to encourage the appreciation of its competences and its visibility.

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Corresponding Address
Edison Luiz Devos Barlem
Rua Doutor Nascimento, 367, Ap. 701 / Centro
CEP 96200-300 – Rio Grande(RS), Brazil