

## OPINIONS AND KNOWLEDGE OF UNDERGRADUATES NURSING STUDENTS ON ABORTION FORESEEN IN LAW - DESCRIPTIVE STUDY<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** analyze the opinions and knowledge that Nursing students from a public university in the Federal District (DF) have on the abortion theme provided by law. **Methods:** it is a quantitative study of an exploratory-descriptive type, with a cross-sectional design. A total of 46 undergraduate nursing students participated in the study. The data were collected through the application of an electronic questionnaire sent by e-mail individually to the students. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data, and the frequency of the appearance of certain elements in the participants' responses were verified. **Results:** as pointed out by the students, there would be a weakness in academic training regarding the subject of abortion. It was verified that the focus given to the disciplines focused on this theme are directed to social and cultural issues, leading to an appreciation of these aspects to the detriment to the other contents, which could lead to a theoretical and practical lack of preparation of these future health professionals. **Conclusion:** it is understood the importance of approach and discussion about these themes in the university context, since these questions have been little worked in the process of professional formation, interfering in the way students and future professionals feel qualified or comfortable in relation to this type of service.

**Keywords:** Abortion. Abortion, legal. Nursing care. Students, nursing. Education, nursing.

### INTRODUCTION

The abortion theme presents several possibilities for discussion. Among the most commonly used aspects we can highlight: morality and religion. There are several other possibilities capable of engaging intense debates, such as politics, health and ethics. This makes it a challenge for society and especially for health professionals who work directly in these cases. It is observed that health professionals are ambivalent about abortion because their moral or religious values can influence behaviors and attitudes, creating situations of conflict between the professional ethical duty and the individual moral of the people they take care<sup>(1)</sup>.

Studies have shown that this ambivalence is associated with two ideas: the first refers to the incompatibility of professional training in which, although the professional agrees with the practice of abortion and the right of the woman, the woman is not comfortable with her

achievement due to their culture. And the second idea is related to the use of conscientious objection to justify the repudiation of abortion, due to various religious reasons<sup>(1,2)</sup>.

However, such placements do not prevent unsafe abortion, since it represents a serious public health problem and is responsible for the high rates of morbidity and mortality among women, especially in developing countries. A survey conducted by the Institute Guttmacher, published in 2018, estimates that between 2010 and 2014 there were approximately 55.9 million legal and illegal abortions all over the world<sup>(3)</sup>. In Brazil, unsafe abortion is among the five main causes of maternal death corresponding to approximately 4.5% of all deaths in this group<sup>(4)</sup>.

The Brazilian Criminal Code of 1940 criminalizes abortion at any stage of pregnancy when practiced by pregnant women or by third parties. Although abortion is included in the list of crimes for life, there are some exceptions to this: when pregnancy results from rape or when

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a woman's life is at risk<sup>(5)</sup>. A third possibility is related to the decision of the Federal Supreme Court (STF) that indicated that abortion could also be performed in cases of anencephaly. For these cases, there is in the country the Gestational Interruption Program foreseen by the Law or, commonly called, the Legal Abortion Program<sup>(6,7)</sup>.

The Legal Abortion services in Brazil are reference units of the Unified Health System (SUS) for abortion care and abortion for women who fall under this legal provision. The Ministry of Health (MS) regulates the services in the country, which must be composed of multiprofessional teams capable of providing the care that situations such as *Prevention and Treatment of Injuries Resulting from sexual Violence Against Women and Adolescents*<sup>(6-8)</sup>.

However, even though it is expressly permitted by law, health professionals refuse to carry out the procedure under various allegations, which causes harmful consequences to women who seek their rights and a negative reflection on the health services. In addition, the difficulty of implementing legal abortion services also occurs due to unprepared health professionals to deal with issues that permeate this issue<sup>(2)</sup>. National studies have shown that both health field students and practitioners are unprepared to deal with issues involving abortion because of a lack of theoretical and practical knowledge of the subject<sup>(2,10,11)</sup>.

The selective approach by the university system during graduation and the absence of courses and/or debates that would help the training of undergraduate students, future health professionals, contributes to the precarious and disqualified attendance of these women<sup>(2)</sup>. It is necessary to stimulate the debate during the process of academic formation as a strategy to guarantee quality assistance for this public. Considering that abortion is a public health problem and one of the main causes of maternal mortality, Nursing plays an important role in providing care, welcoming and accompanying women in situations of abortion<sup>(11,12)</sup>.

This professional does not only care for pain relief or healing, in fact, he/she performs several activities as a political being, transforming agent, educator and caregiver. Therefore, an adequate and humanized academic preparation is

necessary, based on experiences in undergraduate courses<sup>(11-13)</sup>. In view of this context, it is questioned: What are the opinions of nursing students about abortion issues? And what are the knowledge acquired on this subject during graduation?

This topic is one of the most controversial topics in the field of reproductive health, which demonstrates the necessity and importance of its study, since helping students to identify and work with such situations is a way to promote respect and humanized care<sup>(9)</sup>. In this sense, the objective of this study is to identify the opinions of nursing students from a public university in the Federal District (DF), about abortion foreseen by law and the knowledge they have about the subject.

## METHODOLOGY

This is a quantitative, exploratory-descriptive study with a cross-sectional design<sup>(14)</sup>. The non-probabilistic - intentional sample consisted of 46 undergraduate nursing students from the University of Brasília (UnB), among the 96 who were invited to attend because they met the inclusion criteria defined for the research: students from the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> semesters of the course; and who had attended, or were attending, disciplines whose focus was the health of women and/or Bioethics.

For data collection, an electronic questionnaire was used consisting of questions with adaptation and adjustment of questions used in previous researches on the subject and the technical standard *Prevention and Treatment of Injuries resulting from Sexual Violence against Women and Adolescents of the Ministry of Health* (MS). This instrument was submitted to a process of evaluation by two specialists in the thematic area - a nurse working in the Gestational Interruption Program and a researcher on the topic of abortion - who suggested adjustments regarding the appearance and interface of the electronic questionnaire and verification of the content, clarity and comprehensiveness of the questions presented. And, prior to its application, the questionnaire was pre-tested with three randomly selected nursing students, seeking to improve the data collection instrument regarding its applicability

and viability, and these data were not included in the study.

The Informed Consent Term (TCLE) was presented on the front page of the data collection instrument, which is divided into two sessions. The first one included question related to the sociodemographic data of the participants, composed of the following variables: current academic semester, gender, age, marital status, children, color (self-declared) and religion. And the second session included six multiple choice questions that addressed the opinion and knowledge of students about abortion and its conduction during graduation.

In the questions of the electronic questionnaire, regarding the opinion about abortion, the situations by which it could be allowed and the subjects studied (compulsory and / or optional), it was possible for the scholars to mark more than one answer option; which makes the frequencies not cumulative, causing them to be interpreted for each reason.

Data collection took place in March, April and May 2016. Access to the e-mail of the potential participants was obtained through a meeting with the representatives of the groups. After this procedure the electronic address (link) of access to the research was sent to the students, containing: the TCLE and the electronic questionnaire. In addition, the link to access the search was made available in the collective e-mail of each class.

Participation in the research was accomplished through the access to the electronic address, the reading of the TCLE and subsequent completion of the electronic questionnaire. To avoid duplicate responses, the questionnaire was configured to recognize the respondent's Internet Protocol (IP) address, which prevented double entry of information from the same participant. And, during the data collection period, the access address to the survey was sent back four more times to the electronic addresses of the students.

Data analysis was based on the descriptive statistics for the verification of the frequency of the appearance of elements in the message of the respondents. After collection, the quantitative data were tabulated in a database in the Microsoft Office Excel program (2007 version), facilitating the process of organizing the tables

and optimizing the visualization and interpretation of the results - evidenced in absolute frequency (n) and percentage (%). The observed results were later analyzed by reference to the national and international literature on the theme<sup>(14)</sup>.

The study was appraised and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Foundation of Education and Research in Health Sciences - FEPECS/SES/DF, under the opinion: 356/11; amendment: 11/09/2013. The methods and procedures used in the research did not present risks to human dignity, protecting the privacy of the participants and the confidentiality of the origin of the data collected.

## RESULTS

The sociodemographic characteristics of the interviewees are presented in Table 1. The sample characterization shows that 95.5% of the Nursing students participating in the research are female, and only 4.4% of the male students. The prevalence of participants between the ages of 21 to 25 years (75%) and the 8<sup>th</sup> semester (40.9%) of the nursing undergraduate course was observed.

Regarding marital status, there were 52.2% of single participants, 30.4% were dating and 17.4% were married or in a stable union. And in relation to children, 89.1% of participants prefer not to have them, while 10.9% say they have them. Regarding skin color, 40.9% of the participants declared themselves brown and 38.6% mentioned being white. And in relation to religion, 31.8% of respondents reported that they were Catholics followed by 29.5% of Protestant and Evangelical participants.

Table 2 presents the opinion of Nursing students regarding abortion and what situation(s) this should be allowed. It was found that 65.9% of the participants understood that the act was a public health problem and 61.4% considered the event a female right. However, it was observed that 34.1% of the participants reported that the procedure was an act of desperation, 22.7% indicated to be a type of murder, 13.5% said to be a coward attitude and 11.4% a sinful attitude.

Regarding the situation or situations in which abortion could be allowed, it was observed that 84.1% of nursing students reported that the

procedure should occur in cases of pregnancy resulting from rape, 70.5% when there was risk of death for pregnant women, 65.9% for anencephaly, 65.9% for genetic syndromes incompatible with life after birth, 40.9% for risk of fetal malformation, and 34.1% for case of women in situations of vulnerability.

Table 3 presents the opinion of the interviewees about the subjects studied and the content discussed during the graduation course on the aspects related to abortion or the care of women and adolescents who seek the Legal Abortion service. Participants reported that they had access to the topic in the discipline Bioethics and Nursing Legislation (90.9%), and 43.2% of the students pointed out that the focus discussed

in the classes was directed to social and cultural issues in relation to abortion, and then to professional legislation on assistance to women in situations of abortion.

Nursing students were asked if they had knowledge about the Gestational Interruption Program, or Legal Abortion Program, and it was verified that 59.1% of these students had no knowledge about the service, and 40.9 knew it partially. When they were asked whether the university's current academic curriculum would cover technical, ethical and legal content on abortion, 90.9% of the students indicated that it cannot be discussed broadly all matters related to the subject of abortion.

**Table 1.** Distribution of nursing students according to sociodemographic variables. Brasília, Federal District, 2016.

| Variables                    | N  | %    |
|------------------------------|----|------|
| <b>Current Semester</b>      |    |      |
| 7 <sup>th</sup> semester     | 7  | 15.2 |
| 8 <sup>th</sup> semester     | 18 | 39.2 |
| 9 <sup>th</sup> semester     | 11 | 23.9 |
| 10 <sup>th</sup> semester    | 10 | 21.7 |
| <b>Gender</b>                |    |      |
| Female                       | 42 | 95.6 |
| Male                         | 4  | 4.4  |
| <b>Age</b>                   |    |      |
| 21 to 25 years               | 35 | 76.1 |
| 26 to 30 years               | 9  | 19.6 |
| 31 or more                   | 2  | 4.3  |
| <b>Marital status</b>        |    |      |
| Single                       | 24 | 52.2 |
| Dating                       | 14 | 30.4 |
| Married or in a stable union | 8  | 17.4 |
| <b>Children</b>              |    |      |
| No                           | 41 | 89.1 |
| Yes                          | 5  | 10.9 |
| <b>Color (self declared)</b> |    |      |
| White                        | 17 | 37   |
| Black                        | 7  | 15.2 |
| Brown                        | 20 | 43.4 |
| Yellow                       | 1  | 2.2  |
| Indigenous                   | 1  | 2.2  |
| <b>Religion</b>              |    |      |
| Catholic                     | 15 | 32.6 |
| Protestant/Evangelical       | 14 | 30.4 |
| Spiritist                    | 6  | 13   |
| Umbanda/Candomblé            | 2  | 4.4  |
| Agnostic/Atheist             | 6  | 13   |
| Others                       | 3  | 6.6  |

Source: Own elaboration.

**Table 2.** Distribution of nursing students according to the opinion about the conception and the permission of abortion. Brasília, Federal District, 2016

| Conception about abortion                                  | N  | %    |
|--|----|------|
| Act of desperation   | 15 | 34.1 |
| Type of murder   | 10 | 22.7 |
| Femaleright  | 27 | 61.4 |
| Coward attitude  | 5  | 11.4 |
| Sinful attitude  | 6  | 13.6 |
| Public health problem                                      | 29 | 65.9 |
| I do not have formed opinion                               | 3  | 6.8  |
| Others   | 2  | 4.5  |
| Situation or situations in which abortion could be allowed | N  | %    |
| Anencephaly  | 29 | 65.9 |
| Microcephaly   | 15 | 34.1 |
| Pregnancy resulting from rape                              | 37 | 84.1 |
| Risk of death for pregnant women                           | 31 | 70.5 |
| Risk of fetal malformation                                 | 18 | 40.9 |
| Pregnantwomanunder 14 years                                | 14 | 31.8 |
| Woman/couple does not want pregnancy, regardless of reason | 14 | 31.8 |
| Woman in vulnerablesituation                               | 15 | 34.1 |
| Genetic syndromes incompatible with life after birth       | 29 | 65.9 |
| Geneticdiseases  | 9  | 20.5 |
| Contrary in any case                                       | 2  | 4.5  |
| I do not have formed opinion                               | 1  | 2.3  |
| Others   | 2  | 4.5  |

Source: Own elaboration.

**Table 3.** Distribution of nursing students according to the disciplines studied and the content discussed about abortion and their attendance during graduation. Brasília, Federal District, 2016.

| Disciplines studied   | N  | %    |
|---|----|------|
| Bioethics and Nursing Legislation   | 40 | 90.9 |
| Women, Child and Adolescent Health Care                                   | 28 | 63.6 |
| IntroductiontoBioethics   | 11 | 25   |
| Human embryology  | 2  | 4.5  |
| Others  | 3  | 6.8  |
| Content discussed   | N  | %    |
| Social and cultural issues regarding abortion                             | 19 | 43.2 |
| Professional legislation on assistance to women in situations of abortion | 11 | 25   |
| Assistance and technical procedures in situations of abortion             | 2  | 4.5  |
| Anatomical and physiological aspects of abortion                          | 1  | 2.3  |
| Brazilian and/or international legislation on abortion                    | 8  | 18.2 |
| Others  | 3  | 6.8  |

Source: Own elaboration.

## DISCUSSION

Nursing professionals experience in their daily lives several challenges for the accomplishment of their work process, since many of them work in precarious conditions and with autonomy restrictions. Care in situations of legal abortion fit as one of these challenges, since there is no adequate preparation or approach on this subject during graduation that allows a full and safe performance of these professionals. And, moreover, it should go beyond the social, moral, cultural, political and ethical aspects of caring for the human being,

making possible the construction of critical and analytical thinking<sup>(2,13)</sup>.

Such a scenario may justify the opinion and position of students in relation to abortion since 65.9% of them consider abortion as a public health problem, but 34.1% reported it as an act of desperation, 25% cited pejorative opinions, as a coward and sinful attitude, and 22.7% indicated to be a type of murder. It is observed that the position of the students is in agreement with studies that indicate the ambivalence regarding abortion and the conflicting moral values of health professionals who work in the practice of abortion<sup>(1,2)</sup>.

As much as the students acknowledge the issues that are related to abortion, such as: lack of reproductive planning, lack of information about contraception, difficulty in accessing contraceptive methods and/or failures in contraception, violence, low schooling, poverty, social inequality and/or lack of follow-up by the health services; and understand abortion as a public health problem and a woman's right, the concept of abortion goes against the moral or religious thought that each person may have<sup>(15)</sup>. And the use of the influence of this thought - moral and/or religious - as justification for the construction of contrary thinking by the professionals should not be an impediment to the provision of abortion care and assistance, since it is a recognized right in public Brazilian services.

Regarding the opinion of the students in relation to the procedure, it can be noticed the permissiveness in situations already provided in law and jurisprudence. It is noticed that students are more likely to practice abortion when there is a medical justification for their accomplishment. Other national and international studies have presented results similar to those observed, demonstrating that the personal, religious and moral beliefs of the students do not prevent them from tolerating and even participating in an abortion procedure when it is seen in specific circumstances<sup>(11,16,17)</sup>.

And although most students are favorable to the practice of abortion within the legal norms, it is observed by some of them, a tendency to increase the permissive legal of abortion in cases in which there is risk of malformation fetal (40.9%) and when the woman is vulnerable (34.1%). In 2014, a study carried out with medical students from a public university in Bahia found the same inclination to the permissiveness of abortion in cases that are not in legal jurisdictions, but are related to social and/or psychological issues<sup>(11)</sup>. These data show that there is a brief tendency on the part of some scholars to analyze the issue that permeates abortion beyond legal and moral issues.

The nursing student's predisposition to analyze sensitive issues such as abortion beyond what is commonly thought, demonstrates the importance of the nurse as a social-political being<sup>(13)</sup>. The role of nurses in - insecure or legal - abortion care encompasses the

biopsychosocial, spiritual, emotional and political needs of the human being. Thus, training institutions should be able to foster all theoretical and practical aspects of abortion, and knowledge should be extended in order to transform nursing care<sup>(18)</sup>.

It is necessary to adopt programmatic strategies to provide theoretical and practical contents that cover issues related to sexual and reproductive rights in an extended way. It was observed that the participants had access to the - insecure or legal - abortion theme mainly in the discipline Bioethics and Nursing Legislation, indicating that the main focus discussed in the classes was directed to social and cultural issues regarding abortion, leading to an appreciation of these aspects to the detriment of the other contents of the theme<sup>(9,10,17)</sup>. This fact justifies the inclination of some students to analyze the permissiveness of abortion in cases of women in situations of vulnerability, for example. But, it does not support the absence of discussion of the other issues.

The fact that in the undergraduate course discussions about legal abortion and unsafe abortion were addressed primarily in the social and cultural spheres demonstrates the low importance attributed to the subject during academic training. The absence of this debate causes the unpreparedness of the students to analyze the subject in depth, which was observed in the findings, especially regarding to the service to assist women in situations of abortion<sup>(9)</sup>. The curriculum of undergraduate programs in the health field should represent a vision of the current society and its problems, in this way, they need to offer the basic conditions for the adequate professional training to the students.

In many undergraduate health programs, abortion is neglected and/or ignored. Most nursing undergraduate courses prioritize content related to low and high risk prenatal care in detriment to other topics related to women's reproductive health, often due to lack of qualified staff to work with these contents, scientific material, time, fear of possible religious objections and even lack of interest of the students<sup>(9,10)</sup>.

It is observed that there are privileged contents when it comes to an- insecure or legal -

abortion theme, which contributes to the emergence of gaps in the training of students, as found by 90.1% of students when they indicate that the university's current curriculum would not be able to discuss all matters comprehensively<sup>(9)</sup>. The lack of relevance given to the theme contributes to the emotional and psychological unpreparation, as well as, to increase the difficulties in the insertion of this future professional in the health services.

The need to work on this subject at the university level is initially justified as a public health problem, but it also represents a strategy that could contribute to improve the quality of care offered by the health team. Academic training must understand more than just the technical-scientific knowledge of an object of study. It is a way to enable the development of skills and abilities and ensure that future health professionals possess a wealth of knowledge capable of substantiating their scientific and practical thinking <sup>(9)</sup>.

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research sought to identify the opinions of nursing students from a public university in the Federal District (DF), about abortion provided by law and the knowledge they have about the subject. Thus, as the participating university students pointed out, there would be a weakness in the academic formation regarding the subject of abortion. Through the volunteers' responses, it was verified that the focus given by the disciplines focused on the theme of abortion is directed to the social and cultural issues of the subject, leading to an appreciation of these aspects to the detriment of the other contents, which could lead to a theoretical unpreparedness and practical for these future health professionals.

Even though the results are relevant, the study had some limitations that restricted the understanding of the studied subject, which are: the complexity of the analyzed phenomenon and the barriers of the methodological approach used

for the data collection. The electronic address for access to the questionnaire was pre-tested and the request for participation was sent repeatedly to the students. However, participation in the research would depend on the acceptance and feasibility and applicability of the electronic questionnaire used, since this instrument was subject to measures to protect electronic mailboxes (antispam software) and/or their loss amid the large volume of received messages.

However, the evidence produced by this study revealed the importance of discussing abortion in the process of academic training. They also demonstrated the possibility of fragilities and gaps related to the -insecure or legal- abortion approach, which goes beyond the complexity of the topic, which could be reflected in the services offered to women in situations of abortion.

Such findings will allow future projects to explore this issue in different contexts and educational institutions, broadening the debate and contributing to the adoption of more humanized practices in this type of health care. The academic background represents a privileged locus to promote reflection on controversial issues and difficult moral mediation, contributing to the future professionals to feel able or comfortable for the daily practice in which they will be inserted.

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## OPINIÕES E CONHECIMENTOS DE ACADÊMICOS DE ENFERMAGEM SOBRE O ABORTO PREVISTO EM LEI – ESTUDO DESCRITIVO

### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** analisar as opiniões e conhecimentos que os acadêmicos de Enfermagem, de uma universidade pública do Distrito Federal (DF), possuem acerca do tema do aborto previsto em lei. **Métodos:** trata-se de um estudo quantitativo do tipo exploratório-descritivo, com delineamento transversal. Participaram da pesquisa 46 acadêmicos do curso de graduação em Enfermagem. Os dados foram coletados por meio da aplicação de questionário eletrônico enviado por e-mail individualmente aos estudantes. Utilizou-se estatística descritiva para a análise dos dados, verificando-se a frequência do aparecimento de determinados elementos nas respostas dos participantes. **Resultados:** segundo apontaram os acadêmicos, haveria uma fragilidade na formação acadêmica no que se refere ao tema do aborto. Verificou-se que o principal enfoque dado às disciplinas voltadas para esta temática estão direcionados às questões sociais e culturais, levando a uma valorização destes aspectos em detrimento aos demais conteúdos, o que poderia ocasionar um despreparo teórico e prático destes futuros profissionais de saúde. **Conclusão:** compreende-se a importância da abordagem e discussão sobre essas temáticas no contexto universitário, uma vez que essas questões têm sido pouco trabalhadas no processo de formação profissional, interferindo na forma como os estudantes e futuros profissionais sentem-se capacitados ou confortáveis em relação a este tipo de atendimento.

**Keywords:** Aborto. Aborto legal. Cuidados de enfermagem. Estudantes de Enfermagem. Educação em Enfermagem.

## OPINIONES Y CONOCIMIENTOS DE ACADÉMICOS DE ENFERMERÍA SOBRE EL ABORTO PREVISTO EN LEY – ESTUDIO DESCRIPTIVO

### RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** analizar las opiniones y los conocimientos que los académicos de enfermería de una universidad pública del Distrito Federal (DF-Brasil) poseen acerca del tema del aborto previsto en ley. **Métodos:** se trata de un estudio cuantitativo del tipo exploratorio-descritivo, con delineamiento transversal. Participaron de la investigación 46 académicos del curso de pregrado en enfermería. Los datos fueron recolectados por medio de la aplicación de cuestionario electrónico enviado por e-mail individualmente a los estudiantes. Se utilizó la estadística descriptiva para el análisis de los datos, verificándose la frecuencia del surgimiento de determinados elementos en las respuestas de los participantes. **Resultados:** según señalaron los académicos, habría una fragilidad en la formación académica respecto al tema del aborto. Se averiguó que el principal enfoque dado a las asignaturas dirigidas para esta temática están orientadas a las cuestiones sociales y culturales, llevando a una valorización de estos aspectos en detrimento de los demás contenidos, lo que podría causar una falta de preparación teórica y práctica de estos futuros profesionales de salud. **Conclusión:** se comprende la importancia del abordaje de la discusión sobre estas temáticas en el contexto universitario, una vez que estas cuestiones han sido poco trabajadas en el proceso de formación profesional, interfiriendo en la forma como los estudiantes y futuros profesionales se sienten capacitados o confortables en cuanto a este tipo de atención.

**Palabras clave:** Aborto. Aborto legal. Atención de enfermería. Estudiantes de enfermería. Educación en enfermería.

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