



## INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE NURSING AND THE PANDEMIC OF COVID-19: MEDIA EXPRESSION

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** to analyze what was described in the Portuguese media regarding nurses during the first three months of the COVID-19 pandemic. **Methodology:** documentary, qualitative study, based on news published in major newspapers in mainland Portugal and the Autonomous Regions, concerning to the first three months of the pandemic, focusing on nurses and the current pandemic scenario. The data collection was carried out between June 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020 and the thematic analysis was used for data treatment. **Results:** a total of 39 news items were analyzed, with aspects emerging about the appeals of the Ordem dos Enfermeiros (OE) and the Union Associations regarding the lack and need to hire nursing professionals and the lack of personal protective equipment for patient care. Nurses' concerns about the pandemic situation experienced and support strategies for nursing professionals were also evidenced. **Conclusion:** the media essentially published news on the concerns felt in the context of the practice regarding the lack of human and material resources to face the pandemic scenario. In the international year of Nurse, the weaknesses resulting from the non-investment in the nursing workforce were omitted, as well as the value of nurses to society.

**Keywords:** Coronavirus Infections. News. Communications Media. Nursing. Nurses.

### INTRODUCTION

The new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) infection, better known as COVID-19, was first detected in December 2019 in the city of Wuhan in China and manifested as pneumonia of unknown etiology in workers and visitors to a fish, live seafood and poultry market<sup>(1)</sup>.

As it is a pathology with the rapid spread of the virus, with the chance of increasing the occurrence of outbreaks at an exponential rate<sup>(2)</sup>, at the end of January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a public health emergency of international concern.

In Portugal, the first case was diagnosed on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020, and from that date, the number of infected patients increased considerably. After three months, specifically on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020, there were a total of 33,592 infected and 1455

deaths caused by COVID-19, with a higher incidence in the North of the country, followed by Lisbon and the Tagus Valley<sup>(3)</sup>. Worldwide, on the same day, 6,287,547 cases of COVID-19 and 93,246 deaths were confirmed<sup>(4)</sup>.

Facing this scenario demands that aimed at a coordinated approach were sought, with the cooperation of all government areas and from health professionals for an adequate response<sup>(5)</sup>.

Health professionals are at the frontline of health care for COVID-19 patients. Among them, nurses stand out as having skills that make them a resource for individuals, families, and the community when facing the challenges established by SARS-CoV-2 to society. Regardless of the levels of health care, this professional category is configured as half of the health workforce and the main responsible for the coordination of health teams<sup>(6)</sup>.

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Effectively, given such a social role, the nurse becomes a prominent character in health care, through direct assistance, care management, counseling, control, supervision, and communication. The practice of nursing professionals is present in several settings and should have people-centered care as its main purpose<sup>(7)</sup>.

The nurse's professional identity, combined with the profession's principle, makes it crucial in combating COVID-19, being at the frontline for those who need health services<sup>(8)</sup>. However, historically, nurses' worth has only been recognized among their peers, because effectively, society and governments do not appreciate the role of Nursing as a driving force for improving the population's health and well-being<sup>(9)</sup>.

In an attempt to give a voice to Nursing, WHO and the International Council of Nurses launched the Nursing Now campaign, which also runs in 2020, to show the fundamental role of nurses in the health challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, giving prominence to these professionals' competence and leadership<sup>(6,10)</sup>. However, COVID-19 changed the path of the international year of the Nurse, in which events were planned to celebrate the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Florence Nightingale, the precursor of Modern Nursing<sup>(11)</sup>.

Given the peculiarities of their professional practice, nurses are the most present professionals in the care process for COVID-19 patients<sup>(12)</sup>. This fact shows society not only the practical work of these professionals, but also all the other social roles they develop as leaders, counselors, teachers, researchers, and educators<sup>(13)</sup>. Therefore, their unquestionable value is shown, reinforcing the mission of the Nursing Now campaign<sup>(6,10)</sup>.

One of the ways to give visibility to the role of Nursing is through the media, especially by writing news that reports on events. This means of communication and information can also induce thoughts in people, as what is reported is not always the truth and can omit or lead to erroneous judgments about a given reality<sup>(14)</sup>.

Thus, in what was announced as the international year of Nursing, it was expected that aspects reflecting, worldwide, the value and work of nurses were expected.

Inspired in this objective, and considering the pandemic context, this manuscript was developed to analyze what was published in the Portuguese media regarding nurses during the first three months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## METHOD

This is a documentary study, of a qualitative approach, based on online access news from ten major newspapers in Mainland Portugal and the Autonomous Regions of Madeira and Azores. The news refers to the publishing period from March 3<sup>rd</sup> to June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020. This date was considered having the greatest number of COVID-19 cases occurred in Portugal, which also matched with the three states of emergency due to a public calamity decreed by the President of Portugal<sup>(15)</sup>, and related to the three months of pandemic lived in that country.

To search for the news, Google<sup>®</sup>News and the keywords were used: nursing, nurses, COVID-19, pandemic, and coronavirus. The inclusion criteria for the news were those that described the theme of nursing, nurses, and the pandemic by COVID-19 from March 3<sup>rd</sup> to June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020. Paid subscribed newspapers and which did not have a daily periodicity were excluded.

In the first phase, a critical-reflexive reading of the headlines and theme of the news was carried out, followed by the full reading of the findings. Data collection took place from June 7<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> 2020.

For data treatment, thematic analysis was carried out based on the reference of Bardin<sup>(16)</sup>. Findings were pre-analyzed, explored and treated. The critical evaluation, extraction and data synthesis were carried out by two independent reviewers. In case of disagreement, it was decided to discuss the topics or to use a third reviewer.

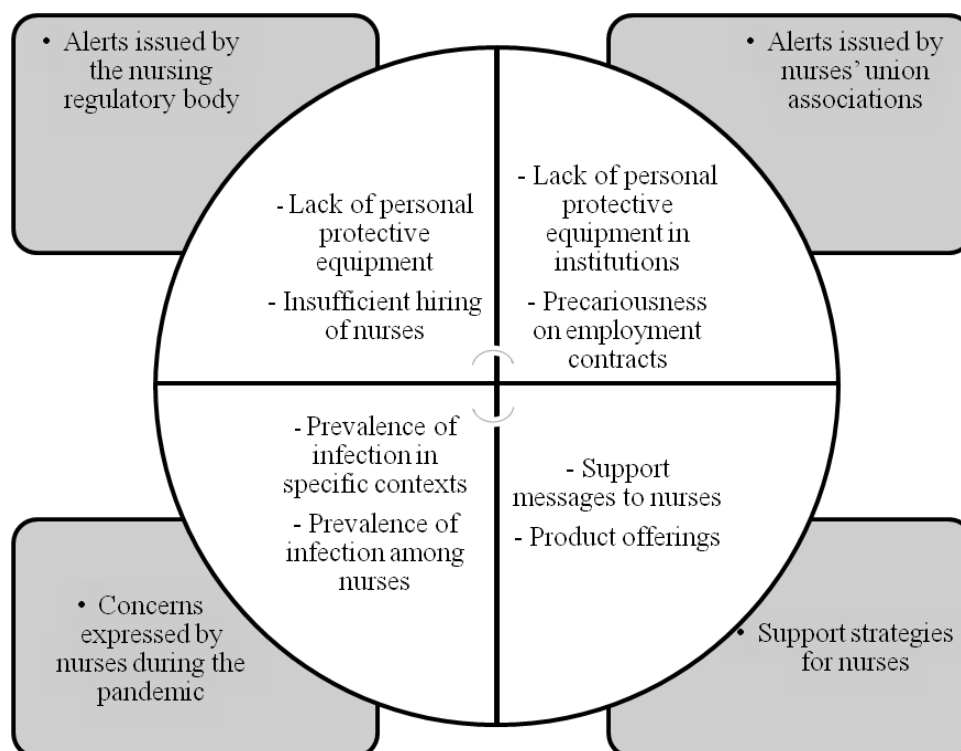
Concerning ethical aspects, since the data collected is in the public domain, there was no direct involvement with human beings. However, to preserve the anonymity of the newspapers that allowed this study, the findings are identified by the letter N for newspaper, followed by a number related to the chronological order of publication. It should be noted that the content of the texts was maintained in its original form.

It is worth noting that in Mainland Portugal and the Autonomous Regions of Madeira and the Azores, the professional practice of nurses, resources and working conditions are identical.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 51 news items were identified. Based on the reading of the titles and themes, 12

news items were excluded because they did not show situations related to nurses and the COVID-19 pandemic. It was analyzed 39 news items published in seven newspapers, organized into four main categories: alerts issued by the nursing regulatory body; alerts issued by nurses' union associations; concerns expressed by nurses during the pandemic; and support strategies for nurses, as shown in figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Findings of news published in the media from March 3<sup>rd</sup> to June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020.

The reflections to be made will take place from the four macro categories identified and presented in figure 1.

### Alerts issued by the nursing regulatory body

The Ordem dos Enfermeiros (OE) has taken an active voice in the support of this category that is at the frontline; thirteen news items that reported some alerts were found.

The lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in the varied scenarios of clinical practice was exposed by the OE, pointing out that this scarcity could subject the professionals and the population at a safety risk. These alerts reinforce the magnitude of the pandemic, with

confirmation of the increase in positive tests among professionals, highlighting the urgency of renewing these material resources.

We have received many protests from nurses who complain about the lack of protective material [...]very little has arrived, and this creates a feeling of unsafety for professionals, who can be infected or infect patients. (N10)

The lack of personal protective equipment is one of the gaps pointed out by professionals who [...] guarantee that they have continued to work in many hospitals even after having been in contact with [...] infected people. (N13)

The[...] Ordem dos Enfermeiros has requested on this Friday for more personal protective equipment against COVID-19 [...] insisted on the

“reinforcement of individual protection” for nurses, stressing that it is necessary that this material (masks, gloves, coats...) arrive anytime. (N17)

In the media, the focus of the news on PPE, devices that need to be replaced in adequate quantity and quality so as not to cause risk to the professionals' safety<sup>(17)</sup>, indirectly gave visibility to the working conditions that are not always adequate. This reality is also experienced in Brazil. The high number of infected people in the country and the scarcity of protective equipment, had repercussions in situations of wear and tear for professionals, associated with the fear of transmitting or getting infected with the virus<sup>(18)</sup>. This same scenario was also experienced by nurses in Italy, who had their routines completely changed to give their best, even in the face of physical and emotional stress, and the fear of spreading the virus at home and infecting the family<sup>(19)</sup>. In this sense, in the face of such a scenario, feelings of frustration developed among professionals, and in severe situations, such as illness and/or death of their peers<sup>(20)</sup> infected by SARS-CoV-2 were experienced.

Therefore, to optimize the response in the contexts, it was also widely reported that the OE requested nurses to provide maximum support to health institutions, focusing on clinical demands. Appeals were made to all nurses with availability and that did not have any employment bonds, to join in the various contexts of action.

Following the appeal of the OE, with the Ministry of Health and the private operator that manages the SNS24 line, more than 800 nurses made themselves available to reinforce the support line for citizens to face the COVID-19 epidemic. (N5)

The Ordem dos Enfermeiros [...] made this “urgent appeal” to all professionals with availability, to help fight the pandemic of COVID-19 [...] who have experience in intensive care, who are in care units primary health care and who can temporarily, on a mobility basis, strengthen intensive care units. (N25)

Thus, the public positioning of the OE contributed to the recruitment of professionals for the Health System institutions, to improve the funds and guarantee greater efficiency of the services.

### Alerts issued by nurses' union associations

In nine selected news, union associations, to “give voice” to nurses' concerns, resorted to the media, making, in some situations, criticisms related to the limitation and deficit of PPE in institutions.

An unacceptable situation, even because, for several weeks, the World Health Organization [WHO] has warned of the risks of COVID-19, noting that not only is the quantity of personal protective equipment insufficient, but much equipment is not complete. (N2)

The union says it has received calls from everywhere to urgently ask for personal protective equipment, whether from hospitals, health centers, homes, donations. They all lack protective equipment. (N11)

The Union [...] will proceed with an injunction against the State due to the lack of material and protection of professionals to face the COVID-19 pandemic. (N18)

In addition to the aforementioned, regarding the lack of PPE in the various institutions, it is also worth noting to warn of the necessity of awareness and qualification of professionals about the problem of this equipment, concerning its handling and use under national and international guidelines focused on infection prevention and control. Thus, there is an urgent need to ensure in the institutions these material resources in adequate quantities. Considering this context, work overload is prominent, associated with the handling of equipment that allows the protection of a highly contagious virus<sup>(21)</sup>.

It was also reported the lack of nurses in health institutions, as well as the precariousness in employment contracts, regarding the contractual bond and stability and the values of the salaries of these professionals.

According to the union, the number of nurses who accept to take jobs in the current epidemiological scenario is also “extremely small”, with the known lack of safety conditions and the proposed hiring terms (four- months contract). (N14)

The Government is offering 6.42 euros per hour for the entry of new nurses, with contracts of four months, and the positions offered are left unoccupied. (N26)

The deficit of nurses in the NHS is [...] huge, the influx of patients in recent weeks is making the situation impossible. Nurses are working endless hours without rest, without minimum protection conditions, exposed to contagion. And the situation will get even worse with the expected rise in cases in the coming weeks. (N27).

Considering the reported alerts, it was possible to observe the insufficient number of nurses to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has also been happening in other countries. Some authors have found the continuous inadequate assigning of nurses, reflecting on the performance of nursing activities by several professionals with needs out of their reach<sup>(22)</sup>. Thus, there are potential implications for the quality of care, the safety of patients and the illness of professionals. Thus, this fact turns into an increased workload, with negative impacts for professionals and patients, since they contribute to the occurrence of adverse events<sup>(23)</sup>, such as the incidents associated with the provision of health care, as well as their omission. Although this aspect is addressed by the media, namely the lack of nursing professionals and the working conditions that result from this deficit, this is a struggle of the nursing workers in which the support of society is undeniable. Thus, the search for the provision of nurses adequate to the workload is a crucial principle for the quality of health care, especially in this pandemic period that we are currently experiencing.

### Concerns expressed by nurses during the pandemic

About the nurses' concerns, 11 news items were identified. The newspapers showed the concern of these professionals with the high number of infected patients in specific working scenarios, such as hemodialysis centers, private institutions of social solidarity (in Brazil, nursing homes, geriatric clinics, shelters, and nursing homes) and some hospital units.

Dialysis clinics warn of the high risk of contagion of COVID-19, which is not being minimized due to the lack of responses from health authorities. (N9)

There are currently around 300 facilities for

elderly people (ERPis) with cases of infected users [...]. We are talking about 12% of the total of ERPis with confirmed cases. (N35)

The news was also presented regarding the prevalence of cases of this pathology among nurses, whether those who were already infected, in isolation and under active surveillance, for having been in contact with infected professionals and patients, which could put everyone's health at risk

There are [...] nurses [...] who have been in contact with other colleagues, or patients who are infected with the COVID-19 disease [...] turned out to be positive later. No one knows whether they have infected patients and hospitals do not say how many patients were contacted or eventually tested. (N15)

Three doctors and two nurses [...] tested positive for the COVID-19. There are 15 more waiting for the test result: ten nurses, two doctors and three technical assistants. (N23)

Nearly 2,000 nurses are at home on active surveillance after having been in direct contact with patients infected with the new coronavirus and are now prohibited from providing healthcare. (N30)

The same reality is presented by a study from Brazil with a focus on working conditions, where the authors point out that we are living critical moment, due to the specificity of the high contagion of the virus, risking the health of professionals and the safety of patients, in association with the lack of PPE. On the other hand, they emphasize that the correct handling of these protection devices is crucial to guarantee the quality of health care, besides being a challenging aspect worldwide, both for workers and health institutions, so the actions of the various professional associations and health organizations are essential<sup>(12)</sup>.

### Support strategies for nurses

In the aggravated phase of the pandemic, the Portuguese population showed recognition of the role of nurses, confirmed in six news items. One of them referred to support messages, reinforcing the essential role of these professionals. Others were related to product offerings that minimized the effects of the lack and continuous use of PPE, as well as strategies

that contributed to the well-being of these professionals.

Concerning the abovementioned, it is worth noting the donation of PPE, moisturizing creams and offer of accommodation, free parking, food, and priorities in supermarkets.

Several hotels and local accommodations [...] will provide more than 180 rooms for health professionals, to shorten the travel and avoid the risk of contagion with their families [...] more than 180 rooms are already available to health professionals and many more can be used. (N6)

Be strong, Heroes. Thank you. The message is stamped on a white cloth [...] is being commented on among health professionals as a gesture of solidarity, welcomed by the employees of that hospital. (N8)

The parking company [...] will guarantee free parking spaces for doctors and nurses in many regions of the country, besides offering all night subscribers the addition of the 24 hours service. (N21)

Throughout this demanding period in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, the voice of society supporting the nurses' work was more prominent, working as a stimulus for these professionals. Actually, the media can and should be used to support the response to the pandemic, namely in information, as well as in the recognition of professionals, which has not always been the case.

It is important to mention that in the international year of the Nurse, it was envisioned the valorization of these professionals with outstanding characteristics in meeting the needs of clients, in promoting and recovering health, preventing diseases and improving the quality of life of each human being. However, these professionals have not received the deserved support for their social role with the populations, with a waste of talent and resources, and direct effects on clients<sup>(10)</sup>.

Although the news addressed the importance of nurses in fighting the pandemic, they did not explain the complexity of the care they provided, the great teamwork, or the various management activities they performed. Such a situation is corroborated by the Brazilian reality, in which

some authors, to reduce the speed of spread of the disease, evidenced the efforts of health professionals, namely nursing professionals, reinforcing the need to contribute to safe care<sup>(24)</sup> through person-centered care, which requires a high degree of skill, critical thinking and decision-making ability.

As for the limitations of the study, these are related to data collection. The fact that there are few studies on the subject under analysis led to the option for the media, specifically the news, which may limit the discussion of the findings, although this scarcity does imply in the relevance of the study, which reflects the view of the media and society about the work of nurses. The study contributed to evidence that the adaptation of nurses to the changes imposed by COVID-19 is one of the main challenges presented by the pandemic. This reality that has never been experienced before was presented as a challenge to all health personnel, particularly nursing professionals, and requires the support of society.

## CONCLUSION

Initially, it was planned that the year 2020 would be the time for nurses to show the world what they do, break myths, and protect their entire trajectory, giving visibility to a two-century profession. It was expected that the media would contribute to the visibility of the nursing professionals and the recognition of their unquestionable value.

However, with the pandemic scenario, there was a change in path. The investment of the media, through the publishing of news, focused essentially on the concerns that emerged from the contexts of clinical practice, as well as on the shortage/absence of people and materials needed to face the COVID-19 pandemic. It was unclear the value of nurses within the teams as a driving force for improving the population's health and well-being, as well as the path and work developed by these professionals as managers and mentors of the humanized care teams focused on the patients.

## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** analisar o que foi retratado na mídia portuguesa referente aos enfermeiros durante os três primeiros meses da pandemia da COVID-19. **Metodologia:** estudo documental, qualitativo, baseado em notícias publicadas em jornais de grande circulação de Portugal Continental e Regiões Autônomas, referentes aos três primeiros meses de pandemia, com enfoque nos enfermeiros e no atual cenário pandêmico. A coleta de dados foi realizada entre os dias sete e dez de junho de 2020 e para o tratamento dos dados, recorreu-se à análise temática. **Resultados:** foram analisadas 39 notícias, tendo emergido aspectos sobre os apelos da Ordem dos Enfermeiros (OE) e das Associações Sindicais a respeito da carência e necessidade de contratar profissionais de enfermagem e a falta de equipamentos de proteção de individual para o cuidado ao cliente. Evidenciaram-se também preocupações dos enfermeiros sobre a situação pandêmica vivenciada e estratégias de apoio aos profissionais de enfermagem. **Conclusão:** a mídia publicou essencialmente notícias sobre as preocupações sentidas nos contextos da prática quanto à falta de recursos humanos e materiais para fazer face ao cenário de pandemia. No ano internacional da Enfermagem, ficaram omissas as fragilidades decorrentes do não investimento na força de trabalho da enfermagem, assim como o valor dos enfermeiros para a sociedade.

**Palavras-chave:** Infecções por Coronavírus. Notícias. Meios de Comunicação. Enfermagem. Enfermeiras e Enfermeiros.

## AÑO INTERNACIONAL DE ENFERMERÍA Y LA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19: LA EXPRESIÓN EN LOS MEDIOS

### RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** analizar qué fue retratado en los medios de comunicación portugueses referente a los enfermeros durante los tres primeros meses de la pandemia de COVID-19. **Metodología:** estudio documental, cualitativo, basado en noticias publicadas en periódicos de gran circulación de Portugal Continental y Regiones Autónomas, referentes a los tres primeros meses de la pandemia, con enfoque en los enfermeros y en el actual escenario pandémico. La recolección de datos fue realizada entre los días siete y diez de junio de 2020 y para el manejo de los datos, se utilizó el análisis temático. **Resultados:** fueron analizadas 39 noticias, que presentaron aspectos sobre los llamamientos de la Orden de los Enfermeros (OE) y de las Asociaciones Sindicales a respecto de la ausencia y necesidad de contratar a profesionales de enfermería y la falta de equipos de protección individual para el cuidado al cliente. Se evidenciaron también preocupaciones de los enfermeros sobre la situación pandémica vivida y estrategias de apoyo a los profesionales de enfermería. **Conclusión:** los medios publicaron esencialmente noticias sobre las preocupaciones sentidas en los contextos de la práctica en cuanto a la falta de recursos humanos y materiales para hacer frente al escenario de pandemia. En el año internacional de la Enfermería, que daron olvidadas las fragilidades decurrentes de la no inversión en la fuerza de trabajo de la enfermería, así como el valor de los enfermeros para la sociedad.

**Palabras clave:** Infecciones por Coronavirus. Noticias. Medios de Comunicación. Enfermería. Enfermeras y Enfermeros.

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