

Safeguarding public health: the responsibility of nurses

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Editorial

In a world marked by constant climate change and catastrophic events, such as fires and earthquakes, nurses play an essential role in public health. They are a front line, a vital connection between the community and health systems, assuming diverse roles, such as health promotion, disease prevention and health care in critical situations.

In the community and public health sphere, nurses have a wide range of responsibilities that encompass providing personalized and complex care to meet the needs of communities. Its contributions are multifaceted and aim to promote health, prevent disease, and contribute to the well-being of populations.¹

For nurses to be able to perform their roles in community and public health nursing, it is crucial to obtain specialized training. In Portugal, this training requires a minimum of 2 years of practical experience before entering the program. This training covers both theoretical and practical content, totalling 90 ECTS.²

A striking example of the importance of nurses in community and public health nursing occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. They played a central role in mass vaccination, promoting vaccination campaigns, prioritizing target groups, managing cases and managing complex situations at vaccination sites.³ Furthermore, they played a fundamental role in managing cases of the disease and monitoring vaccination coverage rates to ensure effective immunization of the population, resulting in a reduction in morbidity and mortality such as Covid-19 and other communicable diseases.

In disease prevention, nurses play a vital role in educating the community, covering topics such as vaccination, adoption of healthy lifestyles, personal and environmental hygiene, and adequate nutrition. They play an active role in promoting health, encouraging practices that prevent diseases and improve the well-being and health of populations.⁴

In the field of public health, nurses also play a crucial role in epidemiological surveillance, monitoring health phenomena, identifying trends and disease outbreaks to implement effective control measures that protect the community. Another area of intervention is participation in environmental surveillance.⁵ We can mention projects related to hospital waste management, the exposure of toxic chemical substances to workers' health and the promotion of a more sustainable lifestyle. Functions performed in promoting environmental health contribute to reducing the environmental footprint and long-term public health.

Another important facet of nurses' work is their support for vulnerable groups, such as children, the elderly, homeless people, migrants, and individuals with special needs. They provide personalized care, contributing to improving the health and quality of life of these groups.⁶

Public health nurses actively participate in programs that aim to improve community health. This includes the planning, intervention,

and evaluation of programs, such as the vaccination program, that aim to raise community health standards. Furthermore, in infection control, nurses play a fundamental role in preventing infections in healthcare environments, ensuring the safety of patients and healthcare teams.⁷ In this context, we can highlight the intervention of nurses in preventing third-party contamination in relation to COVID-19, guiding healthcare teams in the use of personal protective equipment and appropriate behaviour.⁸

Finally, in emergencies, such as natural disasters, epidemics and pandemics, public health nurses are central figures, providing essential health care and coordinating available resources to ensure an effective and rapid response.⁹

In short, nurses are true pillars in community intervention and public health. Your knowledge, experience, and skills play a crucial role in promoting community health, preventing disease, and responding to public health crises. Your presence and commitment are invaluable to the well-being of our society.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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