

History of Intensive Care Nursing in Honduras

Abstract

Intensive care nursing is the nursing specialty that emerged to provide highly complex, specialized care to seriously or critically ill patients requiring constant monitoring and basic and advanced life support. Historically, its origins can be traced back to the triage of sick (soldiers) during the Crimean War, which led to a reduction in mortality. Later, the polio epidemic created the need to ventilate these patients, leading to the establishment of specialized units, particularly in Europe and the United States.

In Latin America, nursing evolved with the creation of educational programs and the professionalization of the field. Specifically in Honduras, the history of nursing dates back to informal and religious care, followed by the establishment of nursing schools in the mid-20th century. It was formalized with the creation of the Nursing program in 1966 at the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH). Since then, the nursing profession has evolved with the introduction of curricula and its expansion to other universities throughout the country.

There is no exact, documented record of the date and hospital where the first Intensive Care Unit (ICU) was established in Honduras. It was likely a gradual process, influenced by advances in medicine worldwide. The first ICUs were probably installed in the 1970s and 1980s, as recovery or “shock” rooms in the country’s main hospitals, such as the University Hospital in Tegucigalpa and the Mario Catarino Rivas Hospital in San Pedro Sula.

The care of the most critically ill patients fell to nursing professionals who, due to their experience and dedication, acquired advanced skills and knowledge through daily practice and informal or on-the-job training (in-service education), because the formal specialty of intensive care or critical care nursing, as it is known today, did not yet exist.

It is worth noting that by 1992,¹ the Honduran Medical Journal, in a publication by Rafael Giovanni Perdomo Cruz, already defined the specialty of Intensive Care Medicine and its role, indicating that ICUs were already an operational and recognized reality within the Honduran health system at that time.

This article aims to analyze aspects related to the history of intensive care nursing in Honduras. In conclusion, the history of intensive care nursing in Honduras points to an evolution from empirical practices toward a professional and specialized discipline grounded in scientific, technical, and technological knowledge, with an increasing focus on humanized care and continuous quality improvement, thus offering comprehensive care to patients.

Keywords: History, Nursing, History of Nursing, Intensive care.

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When writing about the history of nursing, it undoubtedly traces its roots back to the nursing practices of the 1850s and 1920s, with Florence Nightingale’s influence on patient triage by severity and the development of dedicated postoperative care wards. The modern specialty of intensive care was solidified in the 1950s during the polio epidemic in Copenhagen, Denmark, by Danish anesthesiologist Björn Ibsen, who created the world’s first Intensive Care Unit (ICU) to treat patients requiring mechanical ventilation. This evolved through the establishment of ICUs worldwide and the development of critical care nursing specialization.

In Honduras there is no documented history with an exact date for the beginning of the first Intensive Care Units, but this specialty has developed progressively from the second half of the 20th century, coinciding with the training of specialists in this field and with the expansion of hospital technology and infrastructure.

It is worth noting that the history of nursing in Honduras dates back to the first nursing teachers who graduated abroad and to the Directorate of the School of Nursing of the National Autonomous

University of Honduras (UNAH) in the mid-twentieth century (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras, 2025).

But it is from the above and considering that there is no record to date, the desire arises to narrate a brief but sincere story, in the year 2010 to 2012, a Bachelor of Nursing was given the opportunity to continue her Postgraduate studies in San José Costa Rica, obtaining the title of Master in Nursing in Intensive Care, and it is in 2014 that she began work at the National Autonomous University of Honduras Cortés Campus, this being the beginning of an important work and a great contribution to Nursing in Intensive Care for the northern zone of Honduras.

After some years of work in the field of Nursing, the health situation and the complications caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, at the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH), the interest arises as the main university of the country, responsible for fostering and promoting higher education for the benefit of Honduran society, having as one of its objectives to train professionals of the highest academic, civic and ethical level, capable of facing the challenges imposed by society; Also, to promote, develop, innovate,

and disseminate scientific, humanistic, and technological research, as described in Article 3 of the Organic Law of UNAH, a Postgraduate Nursing program (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras, 2005)² is launched for the first time, at the Professional Master's level. This is made possible by the approval granted by the Directorate of Higher Education, through the expansion of the academic offerings for the operation of the nursing career at the Professional Master's level, for the National Autonomous University of Honduras in the Sula Valley (UNAH-VS) in the city of San Pedro Sula, in the distance education modality in the semi-presential expression with virtual mediation, with six (6) orientations: in which Critical Care and Emergencies stand out; given that the center possesses the potential, infrastructure, specialized human talent, didactic resources, technological equipment, and technological platform to fulfill the training objectives established in the curriculum.³ The Master's Degree in Professional Nursing in Critical Care and Emergencies at UNAH Campus Cortés, began in September 2021. Graduating twenty-one (21) professionals; for the first class, covering the period 2021-2023, the second class is currently active for the period from 2024 to 2026.⁴

In conclusion, Intensive Care Nursing (or Critical Care Nursing) is a nursing specialty that provides specialized care and attention.

Constant monitoring and emotional support for patients who are seriously or critically ill, in life-threatening conditions. This specialty aims to continuously improve the health of the Honduran population by providing high-quality, compassionate, and humanized nursing care, as well as intervening early in emergencies, coordinating with the medical team, stabilizing patients, preventing complications, and supporting their physiological and psychological recovery.

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