

Nursing research, a cornerstone for improving practice; philosophical reflections

Abstract

This article aimed to analyze nursing research, a cornerstone for improving practice. It describes theoretical frameworks on research and nursing, nursing practice, and care and research, highlighting the importance of recognizing nursing as a scientific discipline that produces knowledge through research. The ideal path to research and the final reflection that emerges are that nursing practice is not only a place to apply knowledge, but also a place to generate and test ideas that will allow for the development of knowledge, and that the triad of education, research, and practice strengthens the daily work of nurses.

Keywords: nursing, nursing research, nursing practice

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Research and nursing

All professional disciplines have the obligation to increase scientific knowledge through research. In this sense, nurses have an important contribution to make by expanding and updating knowledge and publishing findings to improve the quality of nursing care.¹ According to the International Council of Nurses (ICN), nursing research focuses primarily on developing knowledge about nursing and its practice, including care for healthy and sick people.² It is aimed at understanding the fundamental mechanisms that affect the ability of individuals and families to maintain or increase optimal activity and minimize the negative effects of illness. Nursing science is concerned with research on care, but both the practice of care and the knowledge that underpins it have evolved through diverse ideas, notions, and concepts, which operate within three models. Caring is an art, which is learned and perfected through daily practice in the pursuit of excellence; it is the achievement of expertise.³ Nursing, as a profession and social discipline, is immersed in the accelerated development of humanity in all its spheres. It must adapt to respond with quality and comprehensiveness to the new care needs of its users and society, while also adapting to an increasingly competitive world of work. The use of research provides information and generates the knowledge necessary for decision-making and problem-solving in practice. It is the means to respond to these challenges while simultaneously highlighting the humanistic and autonomous nature of nursing.⁴

Nursing practice

The expression of nursing practice must be based on universal ethical values and behaviors acquired by nurses throughout their socialization through their family environment, education, and the society in which they work, in addition to the ethical values and behaviors specific to the profession. Nursing requires not only a vocation but also solid training, research, and experience to demonstrate the difference between generic care and the professional care offered to society. It requires nurses to have a deep understanding of the human being, a strong capacity for observation, communication skills, and a practice grounded in scientific knowledge, technical skills, ethical principles, and moral virtues or values as fundamental pillars of caring praxis. In short, professional nursing care is built on empirical (scientific) knowledge, ethical knowledge, aesthetic knowledge, and personal knowledge.⁵

The abandonment causes the number of active nurses to decrease even further and, with it, the workloads, which feeds back into and ultimately perpetuates this vicious circle, this spiral that has no end. The crisis within this nursing profession also has another significant impact on research: a decrease in the number of studies aimed at answering specific questions in clinical practice. Undoubtedly, it is the nurses in direct patient care who are best positioned to ask the questions with the greatest practical application and those most suitable for generating ideas and approaches that enable innovation in care.⁶

Care and research

Caring is a process involving interaction with the person being cared for. So how can we research the interaction between the caregiver and the person being cared for? Today, it is universally accepted that care is the material object of the nursing discipline and professional practice.⁷ Care is the central and unique object that characterizes nursing; it is a construct that encompasses all the activities nurses carry out in their professional practice.⁸

The generation and implementation of nursing research requires favorable and consistent coordination with disciplinary progress and nursing thought. With the rapid pace of change, theoretical approaches are enriched, research methods expand their possibilities, and new procedures, some of a philosophical nature, emerge. Scientific research requires the necessary quantity and quality, emphasizing that the results are more appropriate to the characteristics of what can be accepted as science. Health centers are not only a place to apply knowledge, but also a place to generate and test ideas that will allow for the development of knowledge. Once research has been conducted, the next step is to make it known, to make it public so that others can share it and eventually benefit from it for further research, for practical applications, or simply to learn more about something. Furthermore, through research, we demonstrate the evolution of healthcare practice, we promote professional autonomy and independent roles, we ensure that it is evident in interdisciplinary teams, and we ensure that users and society perceive it. The growth and social recognition of nursing depend largely on research, since it demonstrates how nursing care contributes to improving the health and well-being of users, thus justifying its social importance.⁹

Research is a necessity; it is the duty of every professional to reflect on the reality in which they work, to acquire knowledge, and

to apply it. Therefore, it is crucial to emphasize the value of nursing research studies in improving healthcare services and recognizing that nursing care plans are more robust when based on evidence rather than intuitive experience.¹⁰

Most publications addressing nursing research allude to Florence Nightingale (Graph 1),¹¹ and their reference is often linked to two of her postulates: “observation and systematic data collection are necessary for the profession,” and “it is necessary to measure the outcomes of nursing care.” Systematic data collection and outcome measurement are common terms in any definition of research found in the literature, and therefore also in nursing research. Furthermore, and logically, the term “care” is repeated in almost all the reviewed definitions.¹²



Graph 1 Lithograph of a drawing by William Simpson 'A Ward in the Hospital at Scutari'. Florence Nightingale Museum, London, UK

Understanding the research of nursing professionals opens the possibility of identifying the needs to generate knowledge and paving the way for new protocols in various fields.¹³ An essential attribute of research, aside from the rigor of its methodology, is the dissemination of the knowledge generated to the relevant scientific community and other related communities, in order to validate it and incorporate it into the body of scientific knowledge and professional practice; in the case of nursing, this translates into care for healthy and sick individuals, with the primary beneficiaries being the patients and the population receiving care. This process is called scientific communication (Figure 1).¹⁴

Final reflections

Research contributes, through increased knowledge and improved services, a fundamental element for the professionalization of the entire community. It validates findings, lays the foundations and defines nursing care models best suited to practice, and helps define the areas of responsibility specific to the profession. Nursing practice is not only a place to apply knowledge, but also a place to generate

and test ideas that will allow for the development of knowledge. Research is not an elite activity, nor a luxury, but a necessity and, therefore, is part of the daily work of every professional. It is the duty of every professional to reflect on the reality in which they operate, obtain knowledge, and apply it. Professionalization goes beyond identifying competencies or highlighting traits; being a professional means putting the production and responsible use of knowledge at the service of society.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflicts of interest.

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