

THE SOCIOECONOMIC VALUE OF NURSING WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: SCENARIO IN PORTUGAL

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Nursing is a profession with approximately twenty-three million professionals worldwide. It is internationally agreed that nursing is the backbone of any country's health system. This professional group is essential for global health systems to respond to profound demographic changes and a higher prevalence of chronic diseases throughout life. These and other facts contributed to the year 2020 being named the International Year of Nurses and Midwives⁽¹⁾.

However, 2020 was not marked with celebrations as would be desirable from the moment the Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO)⁽²⁾ raised the status contamination of the Covid-19 pandemic, a disease caused by the new coronavirus (Sars-Cov-2), on March 11th, 2020. 2020 is indeed marked by challenges, contingencies, and the demand for expertise placed on health services and professionals, especially nurses, who, as mentioned, are the backbone of the health system.

Nurses are and will always be on the front lines. In Portugal, they support the Guidelines of the General Directorate of Health (health authority of the Portuguese government, which functions as a service of the Ministry of Health). In the first phase of mitigation, with crosscutting preparedness measures, they safeguarded the maintenance of public health and other guidelines that followed according to the evolution and spread of this pandemic, seeking to ensure care provision for the sake of equity, responsibility, and accessibility⁽³⁾.

Portuguese nurses have shown high-performance in the context of comprehensive nursing care in the areas dedicated for the assessment and treatment of COVID-19 patients (ADC). ADCs correspond to well-identified locations/infrastructures, adequately signaled to ensure the separation of the circuits of patients suspected or infected with SARS-CoV-2 from the others.

In Portugal, the following areas were created dedicated to the assessment and treatment of patients with COVID-19 (ADC) by restructuring health services with the management of material and human resources and spaces. An ADC was set up in each Emergency Department and wards dedicated to the treatment of patients with COVID-19. The Intensive Care Units and Services were reorganized to ensure the separation of patients with COVID-19. Areas were created outside the Intensive Care Services to provide the first care to critically ill patients, according to their severity, as well as end-of-life care. At least one ADC was installed in

each Health Center Group (ADC-Community) for Primary Health Care according to population density, geographical dispersion, and the regional and local epidemiological evolution of COVID-19⁽⁴⁾.

This work shows the commitment and involvement of the Portuguese nurses, which might be replicated in any other country, in response to the present and future impact caused by COVID-19. In synthesis, the work highlights our conviction of the importance and indispensability of nurses worldwide for their socioeconomic value and the growing awareness of the returns that investment in nursing brings to society.

The *Triple Impact* report⁽⁵⁾ produced by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Global Health clarifies that universal health coverage cannot be achieved without strengthening nursing worldwide. In part, it regards increasing the number of nurses, ensuring that their contribution is properly understood and allowing them to work promoting their full potential. To this end, nurses should have a voice and be appointed by the political power to positions of decision and consultancy on health policies⁽⁵⁾.

We will have to invest in studies on the economic impact of nursing and increasingly use the existing evidence to explore its use translating the knowledge to increase the benefits of innovation and global and regional experience to strengthen health systems and improve human health⁽⁶⁾.

May the International Year of Nurses and Midwives and the challenges that 2020 entailed through the COVID-19 pandemic be the provocation necessary to develop new nursing paradigms through achievements obtained by nurses in political and leadership roles, where they can express and promote health and the well-being of people and communities where they operate, highlighting the value of the socioeconomic status of nursing.

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