

THANATOLOGY TEACHING IN UNDERGRADUATE NURSING PROGRAMS

ENSINO DA TANATOLOGIA NOS CURSOS DE GRADUAÇÃO EM ENFERMAGEM

ENSEÑANZA DE TANATOLOGÍA EN PROGRAMAS DE PREGRADO EN ENFERMERÍA

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Objective: to identify the theme thanatology in the curricular components of undergraduate nursing courses. **Method:** quantitative, descriptive, exploratory and documentary research. The sources were the pedagogical project and the curricular matrix published on the websites of Higher Education Institutions in Bahia according to the criteria: in-class course active in 2015 and recognized by the Ministry of Education and Culture. **Results:** of the 31 institutions registered, five were public and 24 private; and 4 offered the subject Thanatology. The initial contact with thanatology was in the 3rd semester (37% of institutions), 2nd semester (31%), 1st and 4th semesters (13.8%). None of the websites displayed all the information, and the curriculum matrix was the most available document (68.9%). **Conclusion:** the number of institutions that included the approach of thanatology in their curricula since the start of the nurses' training was still small, despite its importance, establishing close relationships with people and families in the processes of death and dying.

Descriptors: Thanatology. Nursing Education. Bioethics.

Objetivo: identificar a temática tanatologia nos componentes curriculares de cursos de graduação em Enfermagem. Método: pesquisa quantitativa, descritiva, exploratória e de base documental. As fontes foram o projeto pedagógico e a matriz curricular disponibilizadas nos websites de Instituições de Ensino Superior da Bahia segundo critérios: curso presencial ativo em 2015 e reconhecido pelo Ministério da Educação e Cultura. Resultados: das 31 instituições cadastradas, 5 eram públicas, e 24 privadas, 4 possuíam disciplina de Tanatologia. O contato inicial com a Tanatologia dava-se no 3º semestre (37% das Instituições), 2º semestre (31%), 1º e 4º semestres (13,8%). Nenhum website exibia todas as informações, sendo a matriz curricular o documento mais disponibilizado (68,9%). Conclusão: o número de instituições que incluíam em seus currículos a abordagem da tanatologia desde o princípio da formação de enfermeiros ainda era reduzido, mesmo que seja importante, por estabelecer relacionamento próximo às pessoas e famílias nos processos de morte e morrer.

Descritores: Tanatologia. Educação em Enfermagem. Bioética.

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Objetivo: identificar el tema tanatología en los componentes curriculares de programas de pregrado en enfermería. Método: investigación cuantitativa, descriptiva, exploratoria y documental. Las fuentes fueron el proyecto pedagógico y la matriz curricular publicados en las páginas web de Instituciones de Educación Superior en Babía según los criterios: curso presencial activo en 2015 y reconocido por el Ministerio de Educación y Cultura. Resultados: de las 31 instituciones registradas, cinco fueron públicas y 24 privadas; y 4 ofrecieron la asignatura Tanatología. El contacto inicial con la tanatología se realizó en el tercer semestre (37% de las instituciones), segundo semestre (31%), primer y cuarto semestres (13,8%). Ninguna de las páginas mostró todas las informaciones, y la matriz curricular fue el documento más disponible (68,9%). Conclusión: el número de instituciones que incluyeron la discusión de la tanatología en su currículo desde el inicio de la capacitación enfermera sigue bajo, a pesar de su importancia, estableciendo relaciones estrechas con personas y familias en los procesos de muerte y morir.

Descriptores: Tanatología. Educación de Enfermería. Bioética.

Introduction

Despite the advancement of technology in human health care, dying is an event common to all, inevitable, which can only be delayed occasionally. Nonetheless, the approach of death in training courses for health professionals often comes down to few or shallow discussions.

Because nursing establishes itself as the profession responsible for the management of care for human beings throughout the life cycle, it is fundamental to address aspects related to death / dying during nurses' training in depth⁽¹⁾. It is, therefore, a process that initially considers and assumes the humanity of the professional who provides care and of the person receiving care. Thus, nursing care does not end with the confirmation of death and body care, but also covers the care and attention given to the family members who experience the moment⁽²⁾.

Taking into account the intense scientific production, the technological innovations in health that permit the extension of life through new therapeutic strategies and the complexity that involves care before death, it is indispensable to approach the issue of death / dying in nursing. This is so because understanding the set of values / principles of the subjects involved in the death / dying process requires the understanding of the historical, psychological and social context and, therefore, moral, values, justice, rights, duties, responsibility, conflicts and dilemmas, autonomy, beneficence and non-maleficence intensely present in care situations where

there is a possibility of death⁽³⁾. This is why the importance of thanatology is so important.

The term Thanatology consists of the study of death (from the Greek *thanatos*: death, and *logo*: study) and has gained an important space of debates in the professional / patient relations, provoking reflections on humanization in view of the cold and impersonal relations in the hospital environment, as a way to ally health care and the principles of bioethics⁽⁴⁾.

Not only in the hospital environment, but in any context of the nurses' work process, the dilemmas and conflicts are present in care throughout the life cycle, starting with the lack of resources of the health units that make it difficult to guarantee the dignity in integral care for the human being in the course of life and death⁽⁵⁾. In addition, there are frequent debates on abortion, palliative care and maintaining the viability of organs to be donated from a dead human being⁽⁶⁻⁷⁾.

For these health workers, the need to provide routine-based care with objectivity and speed distances the possibility of listening and welcoming subjects and their families who are receiving care. These feelings border on tragedy, frustration and unpreparedness because, if the possibilities of treatment, care and healing are expanded, death ceases to be seen as a natural process, becoming something that involves the "medical power" that, by itself, is unable to maintain life indefinitely⁽⁸⁻⁹⁾.

Thus, in view of that many situations in which death is present in the nursing work process, we specifically raise the question: How is the approach of thanatology present in the curricular components of undergraduate nursing courses at public and private institutions in the state of Bahia?

Although the curriculum guidelines for nursing courses address the theme of death⁽¹⁰⁾, it is a field that deserves further study and attention to the bioethical precepts in professional nursing work.

This study aims to identify the theme thanatology in the curricular components of undergraduate nursing courses.

Method

This is a quantitative, descriptive and exploratory, documentary-based research on the approach of Thanatology in the Nursing courses offered at public and private institutions of the state of Bahia. For that, the data collection had as main source the pedagogical project and the curricular matrix available on the websites of the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

The Pedagogical Projects (PPC) of undergraduate Nursing courses (PPC) offered at public and private HEIs in the state of Bahia were surveyed in the database of the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) in the e-MEC system. The websites of the HEIs were consulted to check the eligibility of the institutions, according to the following inclusion criteria: HEI accredited / recognized by the MEC, offering the undergraduate Nursing course in the face-to-face modality; availability, on the course website, of the pedagogical project, the course plan (CP), on the curricular matrix of the course (CMC) and / or on the syllabus of the curricular components (SCC); and that the course was operating in 2015.

We excluded the HEIs whose information on the websites was inconclusive regarding the presentation of these criteria and those that

did not comply with the other inclusion criteria. The HEIs that were counted more than once in the search site were considered only once for analysis in this study.

The components of the PPC, CP, SCC and CMC were read and surveyed in search of the Thanatology approach. The following were identified: period (semester) when the theme is approached; thematic content the death is inserted in; hour load (HL) of the course and of the curricular component (CC) on the investigated theme; nature of the CC (optional or mandatory); administrative category of the HEI (public or private); and its location in the state of Bahia.

As publicly available secondary data were used in the research, there was no need for submission to the research ethics committee and for the signing of the Informed Consent Form. The institutions' anonymity was guaranteed using Roman numerals in the sequential order of the data collection, which took place from April to June 2015.

Through the advanced search in e-MEC, 56 HEIs were found that offered the Nursing course in Bahia (some with several campi). After excluding HEIs with repeated codes, 29 remained for consideration in this study. The collected data were organized as a table and the simple frequency was calculated to establish basic statistics of the results found.

Results

After collecting the data on the e-MEC website and after the search on the website of each accredited institution that complied with the inclusion criteria, the variables were evidenced that permitted an initial characterization of the HEIs, considering the undergraduate nursing courses in the state of Bahia (Chart 1), besides other variables to identify the approach of Thanatology at these HEIs.

Chart 1 – Characterization of Higher Education Institutions by macro-region of Bahia, city, administrative category, hour load of the course, document available and percentage of HEI per region. Salvador, Bahia, Brazil – 2016

Region	City	HEI	Administrative category of HEI	Hour load of course (hours)	Document available on website	HEIs in region (%)
Center East	Feira de Santana	XI	Private	4,250	M	3.23
Extreme South	Teixeira de Freitas	IX	Private	3,704	M	9.68
	Eunápolis	XV	Private	4,800	M	
	Santa Cruz de Cabralia	XXIII	Private	3,640	M+E	
East	Lauro de Freitas	VII	Private	4,000	PPC+M	38.71
	Governador Mangabeira	V	Private	4,080	M	
	Cachoeira	XXII	Private	4,160	M	
	Salvador	III	Private	4,000	M	
		XIII	Private	4,540	PPC+M	
		XIV	Private	4,400	M	
		XX	Private	4,000	M	
		XXI*	Private	4,260	E+M	
		XXIV	Private	4,010	M	
		XXV	Private	4,064	PPC+M	
XXVI	Public	4,590	PPC+E			
XXVIII	Private	4,005	M			
Northeast	Alagoinhas	XVIII	Private	4,504	M	9.68
	Paripiranga	I	Private	4,710	M	
	Ribeira do Pombal	XIX	Private	4,602	M	
North	Senhor do Bonfim	XXI	Public	4,260	E+M	6.45
	Paulo Afonso	X	Private	4,800	PC+M	
West	Barreiras	VIII	Private	4,312	M	3.23
Southwest	Guanambi	II	Private	4,160	M	12.90
		XXI**	Public	4,260	E+M	
	Vitória da Conquista	IV	Private	4,160	PC	
		XXVII	Public	4,552	M	
South	Ilhéus	XII	Public	3,825	M	16.12
		XVI	Private	4,112	M	
		XVII	Private	4,800	M	
	Jequié	VI	Private	4,000	M	
		XXIX	Public	4,415	M+E	

Source: Created by the authors, based on the e-MEC website (list of Institutions per code) and respective institutional websites.

Health Regions in the State of Bahia⁽¹¹⁾.

** The HEI XXI has hubs in three cities in the state of Bahia; therefore, it is repeated in the chart.

As shown in the chart 1, concerning the characteristics of the HEIs in Bahia, 29 institutions were included in the study, 38.7% of which were located in the capital, Salvador, and in the metropolitan region. The regions with the lowest concentrations of HEIs were the Central East and West, both with 3.23% when compared to the other regions. It should be noted that no HEIs were not identified in the Center-North.

Regarding the administrative category of the HEIs, 17.2% were public and 82.7% private. Regarding the hour loads of the courses at the analyzed institutions, it was observed that 3 (10.34%) had a load of less than 4,000 hours. Of these, two are private and are located in the Extreme South, while one is public and located in the South.

When dealing with the availability of information about the course and its offer of curricular components, no institution presented all the information on its websites (PPC, CP, CMC, SCC), the curricular matrix being the most present on the pages accessed (68.9%). The

isolated menu, as well as the association of CMC + CP, CMC + SCC and PPC + SCC, were present in 13.8% of institutional websites; and the Course Plan was present in an isolated way on the site of 3.4% of the institutions.

When looking for the approach of the Thanatology subject in the CMC, SCC and PPC available on the websites, only 13.8% of the HEIs offer Thanatology as a discipline. As a compulsory subject, it exists in only 6.9% of these, and in the same proportion as an optional subject.

The theme is present in several curricular components, as can be observed in Chart 2. Regarding the period in which the subject is addressed in the training of nursing students, it was noted that: in 37% of the HEIs, the first contact occurs in the 3rd course semester; in 31%, in the 2nd semester; and in only 13.8% of HEIs, the subject is already addressed in the 1st and 4th semesters. The hour load of the curricular components offered by the HEIs ranged from 36 to 306 hours.

Chart 2 – Classification of subjects / contents / curricular components related to Thanatology according to the semester of first contact, nature of this subject, hour load and existence of specific component. Salvador, Bahia, Brazil – 2016 (to be continued)

HEI	Semester of initial contact with Thanatology	Curricular component	Nature of curricular component	Hour load of curricular component
I	5 th	Ethics and Deontology in Nursing	Compulsory	80 h
II	2 nd	Bioethics and Deontology	Compulsory	40 h
III	3 rd	Bioethics/Semiology	Compulsory	40 h/80 h
IV	2 nd	Deontology and Bioethics in Nursing	Compulsory	30 h
V	4 th	Semiology and Physical Examination Techniques in Nursing	Compulsory	80 h
VI	4 th	Semiology and Physical Examination Techniques in Nursing	Compulsory	120 h
VII	3 rd	Technical and Semiological Fundamentals of Nursing	Compulsory	160 h
VIII	2 nd	Nursing Fundamentals I	Compulsory	36 h
IX	3 rd	Semiology in Nursing I	Compulsory	108 h

Chart 2 – Classification of subjects / contents / curricular components related to Thanatology according to the semester of first contact, nature of this subject, hour load and existence of specific component. Salvador, Bahia, Brazil – 2016 (conclusion)

HEI	Semester of initial contact with Thanatology	Curricular component	Nature of curricular component	Hour load of curricular component
X	1 st	Bioethics and Legislation in Nursing	Compulsory	40 h
XI	2 nd	Bioethics and Deontology	Compulsory	-
XII	3 rd	Semiology and Physical Examination Techniques in Nursing	Compulsory	75 h
XIII	3 rd	Bioethics/Fundamentals in the care process	Compulsory	80 h/144 h
XIV	3 rd	Deontology, Ethics and Bioethics	Compulsory	40 h
XV	3 rd	Semiology and Physical Examination Techniques in Nursing	Compulsory	72 h
XVI	3 rd	Semiology and Physical Examination Techniques	Compulsory	72 h
XVII	2 nd	Bioethics and Professional Ethics	Compulsory	40 h
XVIII	4 th	Semiology and Physical Examination Techniques	Compulsory	90 h
XIX	1 st	Ethics and Bioethics	Compulsory	36 h
XX	3 rd	Semiology and Physical Examination Techniques	Compulsory	(-)
XXI	3 rd	Ethics	Compulsory	45 h
XXI	3 rd	Ethics	Compulsory	45 h
XXI	3 rd	Ethics	Compulsory	45 h
XXII	2 nd	Conceptual bases of care	Compulsory	36 h
XXIII*	1 st	Semiology and Physical Examination Techniques I	Compulsory	40 h
XXIV*	2 nd	Bioethics and professional legislation	Compulsory	60 h
XXV	1 st	Ethics and bioethics	Compulsory	54 h
XXVI*	2 nd	Ethics and bioethics I	Compulsory	34 h
XXVII	4 th	Theoretical and technical bases of nursing	Compulsory	306 h
XXVIII	3 rd	Fundamentals of nursing care I	Compulsory	105 h
XXIX	2 nd	Deontology in nursing and bioethics	Compulsory	60 h

Source: Created by the authors based on the e-MEC website (list of Institutions per code) and websites of the respective institutions (Curricular Matrix, Syllabus and Course Plan).

Legend: (-) = Information available on the website.

In Chart 3, the main knowledge areas linked to Thanatology are presented, as well as the subjects/contents and curricular components,

how frequently thanatology is addressed and the hour load of the components, which ranged between 20-306 h.

Chart 3 – Characteristics of arrangement of thanatology in the course per knowledge area, curricular component, frequency and hour load. Salvador, Bahia, Brazil – 2016 (to be continued)

Knowledge area linked to Thanatology	Subjects/ Contents/ Curricular components	Frequency of presentations of components on thanatology (%)	General variation of hour load of these components (minimum-maximum)
Instrumental aspects of thanatology	- Fundamentals of the care process; Semiology; Semiology and physical examination techniques and II; Nursing care knowledge and methods; Methodology of the care process; Nursing fundamentals I and II; technical and semiologic fundamentals of nursing I and II; Fundamentals of the Science and art of care; Fundamentals of nursing care; Fundamentals of semiology and physical examination techniques; Semiology and applied physical examination techniques; Conceptual bases of care I and II; Fundamental nursing practices.	63	36-306 h
Ethical, bioethical, deontological and philosophical knowledge/ fundamentals	Ethics: Ethics and bioethics; Ethics and deontology; Ethics, bioethics and practice; Education, ethics and bioethics in health. Bioethics: Bioethics and professional legislation; Bioethics and deontology. Deontology: Deontology in nursing and bioethics; Deontology, ethics and bioethics; Professional practice, deontology and legislation.	23	30-80 h

Chart 3 – Characteristics of arrangement of thanatology in the course per knowledge area, curricular component, frequency and hour load. Salvador, Bahia, Brazil – 2016 (conclusion)

Knowledge area linked to Thanatology	Subjects/ Contents/ Curricular components	Frequency of presentations of components on thanatology (%)	General variation of hour load of these components (minimum-maximum)
Themes closely related to thanatology	Nursing care in oncology; Oncology nursing; Nursing in home care, end of life and finiteness; Patients beyond care; thanatology and palliative care.	11	20-72 h

Source: Created by the authors based on the e-MEC website (list of Institutions per code) and websites of respective institutions (Curricular matrix, Syllabus and Course Plan).

Discussion

The data suggested that there is a lack of information on the websites of the HEIs regarding the structuring of their Political Pedagogical Projects, with only the curricular matrix being available on most of the sites accessed. In this reality, comprehensive assessments of the HEIs are impossible, mainly due to the limited supply of information about the courses available to the public.

Although the Center-North has a territory of 47,993 km², composed of the micro-regions Irecê and Jacobina, no HEIs were identified in this region. Despite the commitment to the expansion and internalization project of the universities that are chosen by geographical location, this region is in deficit. It is highlighted that, in hosting an HEI, cities have greater possibilities for growth and development, in addition to meeting the demands for professional training of their citizens and neighboring cities⁽¹²⁾.

The expressive number of private HEIs draws attention, with 17.2% public HEIs and 82.7% private schools in Bahia, showing that public HEIs have for a long time presented factors that created precedents for this, such as the precariousness of facilities, incipient resources, lack of equipment and salary conditions⁽¹²⁾.

Regarding the hour loads of the nursing courses, it was observed that 10.34% of the HEIs had a workload of less than 4,000 hours. Opinion CNE / CES No. 213/2008, however, lists the hours of health courses and adjusts to 4,000 minimum hours for the nursing course⁽¹³⁾.

With regard to the approach of the Thanatology theme as a specific curricular component, it seems to be incipient in the HEIs evaluated, although the initial contact with the subject does not happen that late as, within the first two years of the course, all HEIs approach the theme in some phase. Only 13.8% of these HEIs are already working on the subject in the first semester of undergraduation; in others, the theme is part of optional components and / or during very few hours.

This incipient nature of the thematic approach is shown as a cultural and inherent factor of human relations, mainly Western; the word death and its confrontation are historically treated by our society as a taboo. Thus, its meaning is linked to loss, pain and suffering⁽¹⁴⁾, and it is not difficult to see that death and dying are often hidden and / or disguised for children, in order to cause fear, anguish and amazement only by the denial of this event.

In the same way, this is reflected in the training of health professionals, in view of the

countless past and current studies that help in the extension of life and normal recovery of the “biological machine”, the human body. This is why academics often focus on life-saving curricula at the expense of the discussion of dying and death⁽¹⁵⁾.

In this study, it was noticed that only 13.8% of the HEIs have Thanatology as a discipline. The mandatory subjects exist in only 6.9% of these, and the optional subjects in the same proportion. On this dynamic, article (15) exposes the experience report in the offering of an optional discipline named “Psychology of Death” at the University where the author taught and highlights some reasons for students to search for this discipline: understanding death; familiarization with a subject considered taboo; self-knowledge, considering death as an internal taboo; and instrumentalization of a praxis. Thus, the author demonstrated that the students took the elective discipline to understand and gain self-knowledge in the situation of watching someone die.

In relation to the main areas of knowledge related to thanatology, the disciplines / content and curricular component and how frequently thanatology is addressed, this study demonstrated that, in 63% of cases, thanatology is approached directly or indirectly at several moments during the course. Nevertheless, the equipment of the nursing profession that, at a given time, discusses death / dying were the components in which most of the approaches occurred. The ethical, bioethical, and philosophical aspects of this discussion remain in the background with a frequency of 23% in the course components, while the specific approach of thanatology in only 11%, at the institutions where this actually occurred.

In this sense, little is commented on the emotional aspects of these professionals who are very close to patients in end-of-life situations and also to their families. Studies on the issue of death / dying and health professionals, especially nursing professionals, bring technical and biological discourses in their approaches, focusing on the practical area of caring for the

dead body⁽¹⁶⁾. Most approaches in the teaching / learning process bring death as something the professionals deal with daily, but as far as emotional support is concerned, how to handle the very feelings and stresses surrounding the situation of death / dying situation, this is not discussed⁽¹⁷⁻¹⁸⁾. Consequently, with insufficient emotional theoretical input, nursing professionals tend to reach the job market unprepared, acting based on what is learned in other curricular components, as observed in this study.

It is important to emphasize the need to focus on thanatology from the viewpoint of humanized care, the care for terminal patients, and the training of professionals. Thus, it is important to implement educational programs that value the spiritual and emotional dimension of the nursing team, in the understanding that, in order to care for the other, one needs to take care of the emotional aspect of the caregiver⁽¹⁷⁾.

It should also be pointed out that, in addition to a specific approach to thanatology, topics related to death need to be included in all curricular components, in a cross-sectional knowledge process. Although, in this study, only 13.7% of HEIs were found in which thanatology is a specific course component, the others present themes associated with death in several components, from the first semesters, even if technically speaking. The cross-sectional approach of themes is healthy, as the development of professional skills requires daily involvement, interest, a search to improve knowledge about the subject, and involves breaking with pre-judgments, myths and fears historically involved in the training⁽¹⁴⁾.

The limitation of this study lies in the insufficient information on the HEI websites on thanatology. No institution presented all the information on its website (PPC, CP, CMC, SCC), which made it impossible to more precisely investigate its curricular components regarding the approach of thanatology. The HEIs studied limited the presentation of information on their websites (PPC, CP, CMC and SCC), without disclosing the thanatology addressed in other curricular components.

Conclusion

It was observed that the websites of the HEIs offered limited information on their Political Pedagogical Projects, which made it difficult to verify the curricular components, the courses and the entire structure of the HEIs.

It was also noticed that the approach of the theme thanatology was a specific course component at a few institutions and that most of them brought the approach with similar and incipient contents in other disciplines. Thus, a more specific approach of thanatology is necessary in the training of health professionals, with greater emphasis on the training of nursing professionals who are closer to the terminal patients, and their families, and provide care in the process of death and dying.

It is concluded that the number of institutions that include in their curricula the approach of thanatology from the beginning of nursing training is still reduced, even if important, by establishing close relationships with people and families in the processes of death and dying.

It is important to emphasize that the mental aspects of these workers are an important theme to be studied as, in addition to the process of death and dying, they always deal with ethical dilemmas / problems in their activities, which creates conflicts and a high stress load. Therefore, the professional needs to be prepared to conduct care in times of death and death, with important interpersonal skills in human care, which can be guided by the teaching and learning process.

Collaborations:

1. conception, design, analysis and interpretation of data: Luna Vitória Cajé Moura, Eva Carneiro Silva Passos and Rose Manuela Marta Santos;

2. writing of the article and relevant critical review of the intellectual content: Luna Vitória Cajé Moura, Eva Carneiro Silva Passos, Rose Manuela Marta Santos, Darci de Oliveira Santa Rosa and Carlito Lopes Nascimento Sobrinho;

3. final approval of the version to be published: Luna Vitória Cajé Moura, Eva Carneiro Silva Passos, Rose Manuela Marta Santos, Darci de Oliveira Santa Rosa and Carlito Lopes Nascimento Sobrinho.

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