

THEORETICAL ARTICLE/ESSAYS

Homeless population and COVID-19: Reflections in light of nursing theories

Pessoas em situação de rua frente à COVID-19: Reflexões à luz de teorias de enfermagem

Personas sin hogar frente a la COVID-19: Reflexiones desde las teorías de enfermería

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Abstract

Background: COVID-19 is an acute respiratory illness caused by a novel human coronavirus. Due to the accelerated spread of the virus, health authorities have advocated social distancing. Homeless people have difficulties meeting this requirement due to a lack of access to fundamental rights such as housing, education, and health. The epistemological bases of nursing theories contribute to underpinning the care provided to these people.

Objective: To reflect on the health care of the homeless population during the COVID-19 pandemic in light of five nursing theories.

Main topics under analysis: The theories of Nightingale, Roy, Horta, Peplau, and Henderson have care approaches focused on the basic needs of homeless people who require immediate interventions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion: Nursing theories provide scientific support to caring for the homeless population based on physical, biological, and social aspects through intersectoral partnerships that can promote care during and after the pandemic.

Keywords: homeless people; public health; COVID-19; nursing theories; nursing

Resumo

Enquadramento: COVID-19 é uma doença respiratória aguda causada por um novo coronavírus humano. Devido à disseminação acelerada do vírus, as autoridades sanitárias preconizaram o distanciamento social. Neste sentido, a população em situação de rua vivencia dificuldades para atender a tal demanda, pela ausência de direitos básicos, como moradia, educação e saúde. Para a enfermagem, as bases epistemológicas guiadas por teorias de enfermagem contribuem para alicerçar o cuidado para essas pessoas.

Objetivo: Refletir sobre o cuidado à saúde da população em situação de rua diante da pandemia de COVID-19 à luz de cinco teorias de enfermagem.

Principais tópicos em análise: As teorias de Nightingale, Roy, Horta, Peplau e Henderson possuem abordagens para o cuidado pautado nas necessidades básicas das pessoas em situação de rua, que frente à COVID-19 requerem ações imediatas.

Conclusão: o cuidado de enfermagem baseado nos aspetos físicos, biológicos e sociais encontram nas teorias de enfermagem suporte científico para o cuidado à população em situação de rua com parcerias intersectoriais que possam promover o cuidado durante e após pandemia.

Palavras-chave: pessoas em situação de rua; saúde pública; COVID-19; teorias de enfermagem; enfermagem

Resumen

Marco contextual: La COVID-19 es una enfermedad respiratoria aguda causada por un nuevo coronavirus humano. Debido a la acelerada propagación del virus, las autoridades sanitarias han abogado por el distanciamiento social. En este sentido, la población sin hogar experimenta dificultades para responder a dicha demanda, debido a la ausencia de derechos básicos, como la vivienda, la educación y la salud. Para la enfermería, los fundamentos epistemológicos guiados por las teorías de enfermería contribuyen a fundamentar los cuidados a estas personas.

Objetivo: Reflexionar sobre los cuidados de salud de las personas sin hogar ante la pandemia de la COVID-19 en función de cinco teorías de enfermería.

Principales temas en análisis: Las teorías de Nightingale, Roy, Horta, Peplau y Henderson tienen enfoques de cuidado basados en las necesidades básicas de las personas sin hogar, quienes, frente a la COVID-19, requieren una acción inmediata.

Conclusión: Los cuidados de enfermería basados en los aspectos físicos, biológicos y sociales encuentran apoyo científico en las teorías de enfermería para el cuidado de las personas sin hogar con asociaciones intersectoriales que pueden promover cuidados durante y después de la pandemia.

Palabras clave: personas sin hogar; salud pública; COVID-19; teorías de enfermería



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Introduction

COVID-19 is an acute respiratory illness caused by a novel human coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) that obtained pandemic status in March 2020, 2 months after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a public health emergency of international concern. Brazil confirmed the first case of COVID-19 on February 26, 2020, and since then the virus has progressively spread, accounting for thousands of deaths in Brazil and worldwide (Brasil, 2020; Fahmi, 2019; Zhou et al., 2020).

Due to the accelerated transmission of the virus, health authorities have advocated social distancing as one of the main measures to contain its spread, causing radical changes in people's daily lives and transforming their habits and attitudes. Other preventive measures, such as suspension of face-to-face academic activities, closure of businesses and public agencies, and the recommendation for people to stay at home, were gradually implemented - to a greater or lesser extent - in most countries worldwide (Oliveira et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2020).

Given this reality and the emerging need to implement pandemic control measures, it is essential to revisit the reality of vulnerable populations, such as the homeless population, whose health recommendations impact the reality of the contexts of income and access to food and running water. These factors influence the further spread and worsening of the disease due to the lack of fundamental rights such as health, education, and housing. Brazil has no official data on the homeless population, which was estimated at 22,1869 people in 2020 (Natalino, 2020). Health care workers, especially nursing professionals, in the front line of prevention or the fight against COVID-19, have faced new challenges in meeting the demands of this population. In this context, nursing theories are epistemological foundations that support the development of nurses' scientific knowledge and professional practice, considering the complexity and multiplicity of phenomena that permeate the health field. Therefore, their applicability in clinical practice breaks the contemplative chain and makes it possible to analyze the reality of the nursing work based on the paradigmatic changes and the advances in ethical, bioethical, and epistemological reflections. As a result, it becomes possible to update the four metaparadigms of nursing theories: health, environment, person, and nursing. Thus, in view of the above, this study aims to reflect on the health care of the homeless population during the COVID-19 pandemic in light of five nursing theories.

Development

How to stay at home if there is no home?

Since 1974, Wanda Horta has been studying the nursing process as a scientific method to be applied to any person, regardless of the underlying disease or the place where they receive or should receive care. Basic human needs were divided into three major dimensions: psychobiological, psychosocial, and psychospiritual. It must contemplate the

aspects of the person's experience with the understanding of the complexity affecting his or her health. It is already known that these aspects are compromised in the street scenarios and that they have been even more affected by COVID-19, since they result from the interaction between the internal and external environments (Braga & Silva, 2011; Horta, 1974).

Although homelessness is not a recent phenomenon, it has been increasing rapidly, especially in large urban centers, and homeless people remain almost always invisible, so that they do not become a priority of effective public policies. Despite this growth, there are no accurate figures on the current number of homeless people in Brazil since the only national survey was published in 2008, accounting for 31,922 homeless adults. In 2019, the city of São Paulo alone had 24,344 homeless people. Therefore, the lack of a nationwide diagnosis reflects the difficulties in implementing public policies for this population (Arrais et al., 2020).

The protective measures recommended to prevent the spread of the virus are the same used to prevent respiratory diseases and many remain inaccessible to this population, such as washing hands with soap and water or alcohol-based antiseptic solutions, educational measures for coughing or sneezing, and using disposable tissues. There are also recommendations for strengthening the immune system, including diet care, sleeping well, not taking drugs, and drinking at least 2 liters of water a day (Ribeiro-Silva et al., 2020). According to Horta (1974), these are the basic needs of human beings that need for them to be as independent as possible.

It is known that most homeless people live without the concrete and symbolic protection of a home and part of them, especially during the pandemic, may not have at least three meals a day, sometimes not even one. Moreover, the use and abuse of drugs interferes with the self-care of this population, also influenced by other factors such as difficulties in access to health care. Thus, the precarious living conditions of this population cause COVID-19 to be an even greater threat to their health (Silva et al., 2018). Similarly, social distancing, which was disseminated worldwide through the 'Stay at Home' campaign, does not apply to the homeless population, which points to the need to implement specific strategies and measures for this population in this pandemic. Therefore, it is essential to reflect on how people without a home can follow this recommendation.

As in a pandemic situation, Florence Nightingale, the founder of modern nursing, went through a war in the 19th century and developed an environmental model where her patients' health was affected by the environment, hygiene, and care. Nightingale's measures related to separating patients by disease, opening windows, bathing, washing hands, not sharing personal utensils, and cleaning the environments fit the current recommendations on COVID-19 for every population segment, including the homeless population (Denadai et al., 2020).

Nightingale considered the need to balance and control the environmental factors of both healthy and ill people. Concerning the homeless population, her thinking refers



to the need for strategic services to shelter and welcome homeless people in specific venues, such as specialized reference centers for homeless people (*Centro de Referência Especializado para População de Rua, Centro POP*). Nightingale viewed the manipulation of the physical environment as a major component of nursing. Thus, it is clear that the nursing work is very important in different care scenarios, such as the streets. As for environmental balance, she stressed the need to identify and separate symptomatic people and refer those with more severe risk factors to specialized services. In addition to environmental control, her theory highlights the importance of looking beyond the individual to the social environment in which they lived, constituting a model of political activism of her time (Braga & Silva, 2011; Denadai et al., 2020).

No health and no rights: consequences of the pandemic on the homeless population

Virginia Henderson's theory and metaparadigm of nursing consider the need for a collaborative approach based on patients' fundamental rights and knowing about their life outside the institutional environment. The collaborative approach presupposes the importance of interdisciplinary and multisectoral views of care. Professionals should have a holistic view in order to promote a harmonious and interactive environment between them, their patients, and society as a whole (Denadai et al., 2020).

In the current context, persistence for survival is even more compromised because the economic effects have also affected this population. Thus, the severity of the effects of COVID-19 is even more evident due to the accumulation of social disadvantages, given that these people usually live in clustered areas as a coping strategy against violence, for survival by receiving donations or begging, or even for sociability (Zeferino et al., 2019). Henderson proposed 14 fundamental needs, most of which are impacted by the factors related to living on the streets, such as sleep and rest, eating and drinking adequately, and avoiding dangers in the environment (Braga & Silva, 2011).

Therefore, it is imperative to understand that community transmission among populations living in extreme poverty can seriously threaten life and public health. It should be noted that in the face of so many challenges this group faces in their daily lives, health hazards are their last concerns; first, they need to know how they will feed themselves, work, and shelter from the sun, rain, and violence.

The marks of inequality in this population group are also reflected in the lack of access to the Internet or other media, relying only on proper guidance to understand what is happening worldwide. According to Orem's theory (1985), homeless people's self-care actions are affected by fundamental requirements and factors related to the health care network, the environment, and the family (Almeida et al., 2020; Orem, 1985; Valle et al., 2020). Self-care also depends on the individual's commitment to developing health education actions to meet the universal self-care requisites. The activities of daily living of this population have also been limited, increasing the

probability of becoming ill, especially when faced with a new illness. The requirement in the behavioral changes for self-care was and is a challenge for the population in general and an even more significant challenge for homeless people.

Mental health of the homeless population during the pandemic

In normal situations, it would already be common to identify a significant number of homeless people in psychological distress and/or using drugs. While some of these people became homeless due to those factors, others developed or intensified these health problems due to chronic stress on the streets as a result of a series of situations of adversity, deprivation, and uncertainty. Acute or chronic psychological suffering has a major impact on people and is a significant health problem and a barrier to treatment adherence among this population (Denadai et al., 2020; Valle et al., 2020).

This reality assumes that the suffering in this pandemic context can further affect the mental health of homeless people. Despite Brazilian strategies such as street clinics, Psychosocial Care Centers (*Centros de Atenção Psicossocial, CAPS*), and Psychosocial Care Centers for Alcohol and Other Drugs (*Centros de Atenção Psicossocial Álcool e outras Drogas, CAPS AD*), the majority of homeless people with severe health problems do not usually use these services on a systematic basis. To make matters worse, these services had restrictions during the pandemic, with a reduction in the number of professionals mainly due to health issues, thus reducing the already scarce possibilities to receive care (Pinho et al., 2019; Silva, 2018).

Hildegard Peplau's Theory of Interpersonal Relations can be adapted to the reality of the streets because it focuses on the therapeutic potential of nursing to provide care and change behaviors through the creation of a bond and health education. Therefore, to teach, it is necessary to experience the cultural habits and understand this group's spoken and body languages to identify their needs, requiring emancipation and creativity of nursing actions (Braga & Silva, 2011; Denadai et al., 2020).

The representation of homeless people's adaptive system is also relevant. According to Callista Roy, it is supported by a holistic perspective that people are constantly interacting with their environments (Denadai et al., 2020). The nurse becomes a reference of this care in the support to coping mechanisms and the search for adaptive responses to promote the person's integrity, using the perception of behavioral responses and building bonds of trust.

The variation of responses is unique to each individual and can be communicated in a subjective way. Therefore, nursing must help the individual set goals for their personal growth and well-being. The exercise of self-knowledge to interact with others is essential to identify deadlocks and challenges in coping with the current situation and develop creative ways of providing care to these people during and after the pandemic. Nursing care must be planned in the search for adaptive responses. Due to their holistic training, nurses should be part of the specialized teams providing care to homeless people.

Conclusion

The concern about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the homeless population must be a priority of health and social assistance policies, given that they are one of the most vulnerable social groups. Therefore, immediate action is needed to provide multidisciplinary care, especially in this pandemic.

For nursing, the emerging biomedical paradigms are present in several nursing theories and have appropriate correlations associated with the process of understanding the dimension of care to homeless people during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the public health field, it is imperative to recognize and give visibility to homeless people and provide them with comprehensive care involving intersectoral participation: mechanisms from the areas of health, society, and public authorities that can expand and strengthen the delivery of care and social protection to these people through joint actions, during and after the pandemic.

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