

## The public health nurse's interventions and responsibilities in Portugal: a scoping review

*As intervenções e responsabilidades do enfermeiro de saúde pública em Portugal: uma scoping review*

*Las intervenciones y responsabilidades del enfermero de salud pública en Portugal: una scoping review*

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** to review studies that refer to interventions and responsibilities of public health nurses, since the creation of the Portuguese National Health Service (NHS) in 1979, to the present day. **Method:** scoping review, following the PCC - participants, concept and context version of The Joanna Briggs Institute. We consulted databases such as the *Biblioteca do Conhecimento Online*, Scientific Electronic Library Online, EBSCOhost Online Research Databases. The publication period was from 1979 to 2018. **Results:** we selected four published articles and six master's dissertations, between 2010 and 2016. The subjects have to do with nurses' activities and actions, autonomy and competences, normative foundations, perceptions of nursing teams, health, transmission and collection of health information. **Conclusion:** the results, even if scarce, provided clues for a reflection on the mode, type of intervention processes of these nurses, who, according to some of them, understand their competences more than they concretize them.

**Descriptors:** Nurses; public health; professional competence; review.

### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** revisar os estudos que referenciam as intervenções e responsabilidades do enfermeiro de saúde pública, desde a criação do Serviço Nacional de Saúde (SNS) Português em 1979, até aos nossos dias. **Método:** *scoping review*, seguindo a versão PCC - *participants, concept and context*, do The Joanna Briggs Institute. Consultamos bases de dados como a Biblioteca do Conhecimento Online, Scientific Eletronic Library Online, EBSCOhost Online Research Databases. O período de publicação foi de 1979 a 2018. **Resultados:** selecionamos quatro artigos publicados e seis dissertações de mestrado, entre 2010 e 2016. Os temas têm a ver com atividades e atuações dos enfermeiros, autonomia e competências, fundamentos normativos, percepções de equipas de saúde, transmissão e obtenção de informação em saúde. **Conclusão:** os resultados apurados, mesmo que escassos, forneceram pistas para uma reflexão acerca do modo, tipo dos processos de intervenção, destes enfermeiros, que segundo a opinião de alguns deles, compreendem mais as suas competências do que as concretizam.

**Descritores:** Enfermeiros; saúde pública; competência profissional; revisão.

### RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** revisar estudios que se refieren a intervenciones y responsabilidades de enfermeros de salud pública, desde la creación del Servicio Nacional de Salud de Portugal (SNS) en 1979, hasta la actualidad. **Método:** revisión de alcance, siguiendo el PCC - *participantes, concepto y versión de contexto* del Instituto Joanna Briggs. Consultamos bases de datos como *Biblioteca do Conhecimento Online*, *Scientific Eletronic Library Online*, *EBSCOhost Online Research Databases*. El período de publicación fue 1979 a 2018. **Resultados:** seleccionamos cuatro artículos publicados y seis disertaciones de maestría, entre 2010 y 2016. Los temas tienen que ver con las actividades, acciones de los enfermeros, autonomía y competencias, fundamentos normativos, percepciones de los equipos de enfermería, salud, transmisión y recopilación de información sanitaria. **Conclusión:** los resultados, aunque escasos, proporcionaron pistas para reflexionar sobre el modo, tipo de procesos de intervención de estos enfermeros, quienes, según algunos de ellos, entienden sus competencias más de lo que las concretan.

**Descriptores:** Enfermeros; salud pública; competencia profesional; revisión.

## INTRODUCTION

The characterization of who the nurse is has been changing over the decades. The nurse was transformed by acquiring new modes of intervention and responsibilities, performance and knowledge, and achieved a different status, marked by a recognized profession, which has established itself in time, where quality is present.

The nurse is one of the integral elements of the professionals of public health services and thus the importance of identifying and discussing the situations in which they intervene, the responsibilities they assume, as well as their competencies. When referring to these, we refer the concept that defines competence as:

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[...] Advanced enhanced competences: the knowledge, skills and attitudes that respond to the needs in the various intervention domains, adding, to the skills of specialist nurses, the expertise resulting from the permanent complexity of knowledge, practices and contexts in an advanced intervention area, enhancing the promotion of the quality of intervention of specialist nurses<sup>1:3478</sup>.

And yet, the:

[...] Specialist nurse is a registered nurse with a specialization course in nursing or a specialized higher education course in nursing, who has been awarded a professional title that recognizes his scientific, technical and human competence to provide, in addition to general nursing care, specialized nursing care in your area of expertise<sup>2:2960</sup>.

Nursing is a profession that exercises scientific and professional care, centered on interactions. According to the American Public Health Association, Public Health Nursing Section, *public health nursing is the practice of promoting and protecting the health of populations, drawing on the knowledge of nursing, social and public health sciences*<sup>3:3</sup>.

We intend to review what is published about the intervention and professional responsibility of the public health nurse in Portugal, given the developments that occurred in recent years, characterized by specialized and postgraduate nursing education, namely in public health nursing, because it seems to us that is not being well evidenced.

In mentioning intervention, we refer to a set of actions with a coherent purpose to provoke change or produce identifiable results. The professional responsibility of nurses constitutes an essential dimension of the nursing profession, embodying a guiding principle of nurses' activity, as prescribed in paragraph 3(a) of art. 78 of the Statute of the Order of Nurses, in Portugal<sup>4</sup>.

Questions persist, as is evident in the process of making and approving the new Public Health Law, mirrors of some discontent of nurses, in the practice of health care, towards patients and other professionals who provide care with them. These situations cause discomfort and aggravation for the exercise of the profession, so it is increasingly necessary to rescue, strengthen and consolidate our field.

We take as a time frame the creation of the Portuguese National Health Service (*Serviço Nacional de Saúde, SNS*), which emerged in 1979, and was institutionalized by Law No. 56/79 of September 15<sup>th</sup><sup>5</sup>. The objective is to review studies that refer to interventions and responsibilities of public health nurses, since the creation of the SNS.

## METHOD

The systematic literature review (SLR) in the *scoping review* modality, by Arksey and O'Malley<sup>6</sup>, and after systematized<sup>7</sup> was followed in this paper. The choice of the studies is not focused on the quality of the research (as this evaluation is not part of the objective of the *scoping review*), whether or not it involves data collection, presents an essentially qualitative and rarely quantitative synthesis<sup>6</sup>.

We follow the six steps of the *scoping review*. The protocol used is that described by The Joanna Briggs Institute<sup>8</sup> and, in its stages, guided us in the elaboration of the research question, led us in the bibliographic search, in order to obtain the best available scientific information.

Stage 1 consists in identifying the research question to be answered, acting as a thread, so that search strategies can be built. For the research we follow the *PCC - Participants, Concept and Context* version. Where *P* is the type of participants (nurses), *C* is the concept (interventions, responsibilities), and *C* is the context (public health), according to The Joanna Briggs Institute<sup>8</sup>, to define the criteria for inclusion and exclusion of studies in the SLR, in the *scoping review* modality. We seek to answer the following question: What has been published about types of interventions/responsibilities of public health nurses since the establishment of the SNS in Portugal?

In stage 2 we intend to identify the relevant studies, which was done by searching the electronic databases. We consulted the Virtual Health Library (*Biblioteca Virtual da Saúde, BVS*) of Portugal; the Scientific Database of the Order of Nurses; the Open Access Scientific Repository of Portugal (*Repositório Científico de Acesso Aberto de Portugal, RCAAP*); the Online Knowledge Library (*Biblioteca do Conhecimento Online, B-ON*); PORBASE - National Bibliographic Database; the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO); the Nursing Database (*Base de Dados de Enfermagem, BDENF*); and the *EBSCOhost Online Research Databases* (EBSCO).

The search terms and descriptors used for the search, combined through Boolean operators, were *enfermeiros, intervenções, responsabilidades, saúde, saúde pública*, expanded through their similar ones<sup>9</sup>. In order to extract the maximum information, they were combined as follows: *enfermeiro OR enfermeiros OR intervenção OR intervenções OR responsabilidades AND saúde OR saúde pública*.

In stage 3, selection of studies; the review process consisted of two levels. In the first level, a review through titles and abstracts, and in the second level, a review of the full text<sup>10</sup>. The inclusion criteria were the following: original research articles and master's and doctoral dissertations about the Portuguese reality, or that address the basic concepts of the research question (intervention/interventions/responsibilities of nurses and health/public health, or their similar ones, competences/nurse's role, professional practice, community health), mainly referring to Portugal, written in Portuguese, Spanish and English. As exclusion criteria we used non-original articles that had nothing to do with the Portuguese reality. In the end, we get a set of texts, through which we made the *scoping review*.

For the second level through the full reading of the texts, we determine if they indeed met the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The survey was conducted between March and April 2018 by two researchers.

Stage 4, collecting the data, resulted in a narrative text based on the year and type of publication, type of study, subject, country, and affinity with our theme.

In stage 5, summary of the data and synthesis of the results, we presented it in narrative and graphic form, quantifying and appreciating the studies. As this review did not foresee any consultation, the other entity, we conclude without any stage 6.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The search at B-On resulted in 2,640 documents. It was refined by the following limiters: full text, date of publication – 1979 to 2018, font types - academic journals, subject – *enfermeiro*; nurse; *enfermero* and language – Portuguese; English; Spanish and Castilian, so we reduced the total to 124 documents. Using the Mendeley app to capture these texts, it returned 44 in pdf. Using the same protocol in EBSCO – *EBSCOhost Online Research Databases*, in concrete in the *EBSCO Discovery Service*, we obtained 5.614 texts.

The BDEF, accessed through the BVS, did not allow for the use of the above descriptors, or of their respective Boolean operators, so it produced no results.

In SciELO, it was not possible to use the operators and descriptors in the same way. But we obtained results through the following descriptors and filters: nurse, more selected filters – Portugal, Public Health, journals, all languages, thematic areas of nursing, public health, environmental and occupational health in article form. We found 93 documents. The Mendeley app returned 62 in pdf. The RCAAP returned only 7 articles.

For the compilation and selection of studies, we performed the first level of selection, reading the titles and abstracts of the 106 original articles, and selected 11. Of these, only 4 concern Portuguese realities, the remaining address Brazilian situations, except 1, which is located in England. Therefore, we reduced the reviewed articles to four, since only these met the last criterion, dealing with the Portuguese reality.

The years of publication extend from 1999 to 2017, and 2016 is the most representative year with 4 articles. The themes have to do with nurses' activities and actions, autonomy and competences, normative foundations, perceptions of health teams, transfer and gathering of health information. Brazilian journals stand out, especially the Brazilian Journal of Nursing (*Revista Brasileira de Enfermagem*, REBEn), and the Portuguese *Referência Nursing Journal*, with 2 articles each.

In the graphic presentation, we illustrate the frequency by years of the four selected articles, as shown in Figure 1.

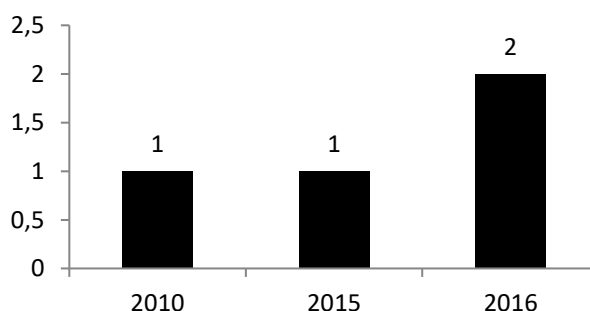


FIGURE 1: Year/Number of articles relation

The research of dissertations and theses at B-On resulted in 1355 documents. The limiters of full text, date of publication – 1979 to 2018, types of sources – dissertations and theses, subject – nurse; master's dissertations and nursing interventions, language – Portuguese; English; Spanish and Castilian, reduced the total to 315 texts.

The application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria resulted in 6 documents, related to master dissertations, for reading. All of them concern Portuguese realities, 4 are from the University of Lisbon - Lisbon College of Nursing (*Escola Superior de Enfermagem de Lisboa*, ESEL) and the rest from the Porto College of Nursing (*Escola Superior de Enfermagem do Porto*, ESEP).

The themes have to do with the intervention of nurses with teenagers, programmed nursing interventions/informatics, communication technology in interventional strategies, coordinating nurse in the community care unit, primary care nurses/accessibility and proximity of care, visibility of the profession/nurse and performance.

For the graphic presentation, we relate the data regarding the date of the defense, as presented in Figure 2.

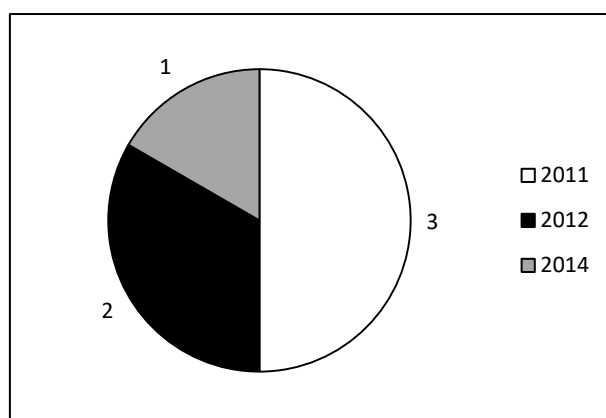


FIGURE 2: Dissertation/Year distribution

We present the 4 articles we selected in Figure 3.

Author(s)	Journal	Title
Guedes VMS, Figueiredo MHS, Apóstolo, JLA	Revista de Enfermagem Referência. 2016 jan-fev-mar; Série IV (8): 27-33	Competencies of General Care Nurses in Primary Care: from Understanding to Implementation
Fernandes CS, Martins MM, Gomes BP, Gomes JA, Gonçalves, LHT	Esc Anna Nery. 2016 20(1):33-7	Family Nursing Game: Developing a board game
Temido MAFB, Craveiro I, Dussault G	Revista de Enfermagem Referência. 2015 jul-ago-set; Série IV (6): 75-85	Perceptions of portuguese family health care teams regarding the expansion of nurses' scope of practice
Rodrigues VMCP	Ciência & Saúde Coletiva. 2010 15(5): 2639-46	Health transmission and obtaining of information

FIGURE 3: Relation of the reviewed articles. Publication period: 2010-2016.

We presented them according to the predefined criteria: nurse/intervention/responsibility/public health/Portugal.

1<sup>st</sup> The *Skills of the general care nurse in primary care: from comprehension to achievement* article<sup>11</sup> addresses the development of skills understood and realized by the general care nurse in primary care.

It uses as a reference of competences, the general care nurse of the Order of Nurses<sup>12</sup>, a document created based on a template<sup>13</sup>, and brings together 96 competences in three areas: professional practice, ethics and law, care delivery and management and professional development. It uses the concept of competence, knowing how to manage a complex professional situation, influenced by factors related to the individual's history, professional situation and education<sup>14</sup>.

Overall skills are significantly less realized than understood. This raises questions, such as whether nurses will have the opportunity to put their knowledge into practice or not. Inquiries that prove to be important for public health nursing practice.

2<sup>nd</sup> The *Perceptions of Portuguese family health teams on the extension of the nursing field* article<sup>15</sup> has as its theme the perceptions of Portuguese family health teams about the extension of the field of the Primary Health Care (PHC) nurse. The composition of the workforce in the Portuguese health system appears to be an inefficient combination of human resources, with a heavy reliance on medical work and a limited field of nursing profession<sup>16</sup>.

Expanding the practice field of PHC nurses, which many countries have turned to improve the performance of their health systems, may not be feasible in Portugal, as each country must find the solutions that best fit its health needs and provision of appropriate services to respond to them. They conclude that there is a favorable environment for this type of change in the area of PHC, as the implemented dynamics stimulated teamwork in the Family Health Units (FHUs)<sup>16</sup>.

However, unanimity is lacking in the assignment of broader clinical roles to the PHC nurse, as some see it as disgraceful and unjust. The theme is essential because the discussion about the widening of the field of nursing practice will also be placed in the public health field.

3<sup>rd</sup> The *Transfer and gathering of health information* article<sup>17</sup>, whose content is to identify how an information program produces changes in nurses' behavior regarding the transfer of information, and to know the degree to which patients obtain information.

Communication is important in the relationship between nurse and patient, and in the cooperation and coordination with all elements of the health team. Often, apart from the patients and their families, nurses and staff are not comfortable with intervening in the patient's fears, tension and anxiety, in the face of the unknown<sup>18</sup>.

The author concluded that it would be useful for all hospital institutions to be able to implement support and information programs in their units. He suggests that this start in the initial training of nurses in order to contribute to the improvement of the social image of the profession, quality of care provided to the patient, and humanization of hospitals and care.

4<sup>th</sup> The *"Family nursing game: developing a family board game"*<sup>19</sup> article describes the development of a didactic material, board game entitled "Family Nursing Game", built, tested and validated for nurses to learn family nursing content in a hospital context. The authors state that they opted for the board game to recreate forms of intervention and teach family nursing. This intervention strategy could bring gains in all its areas, including public health.

From the reading of the 6 master's dissertations we highlight, according to the same criteria, the following aspects:

1<sup>st</sup> The dissertation entitled *The nurse's intervention in teenager care in the context of the Global Health Examination (GHE) consultation*<sup>20</sup> was defended in the ESEL. It focuses on the activities and strategies implemented to develop the personal and professional skills of the specialist child health nurse.

The author refers, starting from the Regulation of the quality standards of specialized nursing care of child and youth health, of the Order of Nurses<sup>21</sup>, that favors the working method of *reference nurses*, for the provision of high complexity care.

2<sup>nd</sup> The dissertation entitled *Construction of the documentary standard of nursing care based on ICNP language: a competency development pathway of a specialist nurse in child health and pediatrics*<sup>22</sup> was defended in the ESEL. It focuses on the computer application, which has in its database a set of nursing interventions already scheduled, and can be selected by the nurses responsible for providing care.

3<sup>rd</sup> The dissertation entitled *Engagement and social support in primary care nurses*<sup>23</sup> was defended in the ESEP. It addresses the case of PHC, where organizational changes have been intensifying to improve patient satisfaction with this public service regarding accessibility and proximity to care.

4<sup>th</sup> The dissertation entitled *Coordinating nurse in the community care unit: challenges, difficulties and skills*<sup>24</sup> was defended in the ESEL. It addresses the process of PHC reform, characterized by the profound reorganization of Health Centers (HCs), which are now part of a Health Center Grouping, and are defined as health services with administrative autonomy, consisting of several functional units, which integrate one or more HCs<sup>25</sup>.

We drew important reflections because they are community care units, to which public health is also closely linked. Still focus on management skills and functions, which despite being the coordinating nurse of the respective Community Care Unit (CCU).

5<sup>th</sup> The dissertation entitled *Contribution of the home visit: perception of informal caregivers of patients with Alzheimer's dementia*<sup>26</sup> was defended in the ESEP. It addresses the creation of advisory services, helplines and the use of communication technologies, which can be intervention strategies.

6<sup>th</sup> The dissertation entitled *For the nurse competence development pathway*<sup>27</sup> was defended in the ESEL. It gives visibility to the profession, because it develops knowledge and skills in nurses that allows them to act safely, based on scientific evidence, as they stand out as valid elements in the multidisciplinary team.

Although this *scoping review* did not provide any concrete study to illustrate our purpose, it nevertheless resulted in some relevant evidence.

Thus, apparently, nurses understand their skills more than they implement them; it is not safe that there is a favorable environment for nurses to be given more clinical roles, even if this option is discussed within the health teams themselves; that nurses and nursing education should invest more in communication/information, even to improve the social image of the profession, to contribute to better patient care and humanization; the strategy of using the game in training and communication may be one of the following ways; that the type of intervention expected from the nurse is based on the working method by *reference nurse*; that the experience of the CCU nurse coordinator has opened the way for a new role, still under construction, for the nurse, and that he has to mobilize skills appropriate to these new context.

A study conducted in Brazil also highlighted the need for nurses to seize knowledge to perform functions that promote health-promoting actions<sup>28</sup>, and an American research highlights the need for innovative approaches to addressing public health nursing competency issues<sup>29</sup>.

Thus, we agree that nursing needs to enhance status with society and thus ensure broad and real recognition of the profession<sup>30</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

Following this review, it is relevant to identify, value and strengthen, which in practice adds to the intervention and responsibilities of public health nurses in Portugal. The results found in the articles, even if scarce, provided clues for a reflection on the manner and type of intervention processes of these nurses, the existence of a favorable environment, in Family Health Units, to the attribution of more clinical roles to the nurse, the appreciation of communication, and even the development of teaching materials, such as games, even though some nurses think they understand their skills better than they implement them.

The reviewed dissertations address realities such as the reference nurse, competence development, or the experience of the coordinating nurse of the Community Care Unit.

Therefore, it makes sense to continue the pursuit of these nursing interventions, and highlight the most effective ones, so that the policy maker can opt for them in an era of constraints on public resources.

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