

## Reflecting on decision-making as a competence of the hospital nurse

*Refletindo sobre a tomada de decisão como competência do enfermeiro hospitalar*

*Reflexionando sobre la toma de decisiones como competencia del enfermero que trabaja en hospital*

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** to reflect on managerial decision-making as a professional competence of nurses in hospital practice today. **Contents:** this current, reflective study was based on discursive formulations on managerial decision-making as a competence of nurses, and supported by the Brazilian and international literature. Electronic databases were accessed and studies published between January 2016 and December 2021 were consulted. Decision making is a fundamental competence for hospital nurses' clinical performance. Engaging other team professionals in decision-making enables the choices made to be the most appropriate to the situation, by allowing the sharing of ideas and thoughts, clinical judgment and validation of care planning. **Conclusion:** it is important to reflect on this topic during training of future professional nurses. Accordingly, training centers and hospital managers should think of strategies that help nurses in assertive decision-making.

**Descriptors:** Nursing; Hospitals; Nurses; Professional Competence; Decision Making.

### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** refletir sobre a tomada de decisão gerencial como competência profissional do enfermeiro para a prática hospitalar na atualidade. **Conteúdo:** estudo atual, reflexivo, cuja fundamentação baseia-se na formulação discursiva sobre a tomada de decisão gerencial como competência do enfermeiro, sustentado pela literatura nacional e internacional. Foram acessadas bases de dados eletrônicas e consultados estudos entre o período de janeiro de 2016 a dezembro de 2021. A tomada de decisão é competência fundamental ao desempenho clínico dos enfermeiros hospitalares. Proporcionar o envolvimento de outros profissionais da equipe na tomada de decisão possibilita que a escolha feita seja a mais adequada para a situação, permitindo o compartilhamento de ideias e pensamentos, julgamento clínico e validação do planejamento de cuidados. **Conclusão:** É relevante refletir sobre esta temática desde a formação do futuro profissional enfermeiro. Assim, centros formadores e gestores hospitalares devem pensar estratégias que auxiliem enfermeiros na tomada de decisão assertiva.

**Descritores:** Enfermagem; Hospitais; Enfermeiras e Enfermeiros; Competência Profissional; Tomada de Decisões.

### RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** reflexionar sobre la toma de decisión gerencial como competencia profesional de los enfermeros para la práctica hospitalaria hoy en día. **Contenido:** estudio actual, reflexivo, cuyo fundamento se basa en la formulación discursiva sobre la toma de decisión gerencial como competencia del enfermero, sustentado en la literatura nacional e internacional. Se accedió a bases de datos electrónicas y se consultaron estudios entre enero de 2016 y diciembre de 2021. La toma de decisión es una competencia fundamental para el desempeño clínico de los enfermeros que trabajan en hospitales. Proporcionar la participación de otros profesionales del equipo en la toma de decisiones permite que la elección sea la más adecuada para la situación, lo que permite compartir ideas y pensamientos, el juicio clínico y la validación de la planificación de la atención. **Conclusión:** Es relevante reflexionar sobre este tema desde la formación del futuro profesional de enfermería. Así siendo, los centros de formación y los gestores de hospitales deben pensar en estrategias que ayuden a los enfermeros a hacer tomas de decisiones asertivas.

**Descriptor:** Enfermería; Hospitales; Enfermeros y enfermeras; Competencia Profesional; Toma de Decisiones.

## INTRODUCTION

Scientific evidence has shown that hospitals are a place of care that requires trained nurses to deal with the complex situations that are found where work overload and deficits of managerial professional skills are associated with factors that negatively affect the users' improvement results<sup>1,2</sup>.

Nurses' skills can be understood as a sum of their knowledge, skills and attitudes to effectively perform their functions; in other words, they integrate several elements, including the professionals' own knowledge, techniques, behaviors, thinking ability and values<sup>3</sup>. The literature has already identified managerial skills for hospital nurses<sup>1</sup>, such as planning, decision-making, interpersonal relationships and management of materials, among others.

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Regarding decision-making, the focus of our study, it can be considered a professional competency in which nurses evaluate and select the best actions to achieve a goal<sup>4,5</sup>. Decision-making in the hospital context is part of nurses' work process routine that permeates the managerial and assistance spheres of care, in addition to integrating the multiprofessional team.

For decision-making, it is necessary to combine previous knowledge that is associated with an active process of obtaining new learning that proves to be relevant to the specific situation in which the user is found at that moment<sup>5</sup>. It is known that the hospital scenario constantly requires immediate initiatives based on the complexity level of the care to be provided to the users, especially with a short period of time for assertive choices and deliberations.

Faced with the nurses' role as managers of their teams, which requires specific managerial skills, as well as the hospital services seeking excellence in care and cost optimization/rationalization, a need was verified to deepen knowledge about managerial decision-making as a competency exercised by these professionals in this performance scope.

It is known that nurses have a limited perception on the decision-making process as a competency that, when learned, facilitates activities and seeks to contribute to achieving organizational objectives. In this direction, the theoretical study proposed in this paper becomes relevant, with the purpose of supporting nurse-managers' decisions, thus achieving greater effectiveness in the results of their decisions. The importance of discussions and reflections on the decision-making process and decision-making since academic training is also observed, as it is from the educational institutions that there can be better preparation of professionals regarding the decision-making process in the hospital environment<sup>6</sup>.

It is understood that a reflection on this theme can bring about contributions in the sense of rethinking the use of Nursing decision-making, integrating care and managerial actions in a perspective to solve problems, in a collaborative way and with co-accountability of all professionals.

It is also noted that decision-making as a competency of hospital nurses is not widespread; therefore, discussion of this topic can favor construction of critical thinking about nurses' knowledge, skills and attitudes in the face of the need to make quick and assertive decisions in the hospital context, as well as rethink possible adjustments for educational centers contributing to the training of these professionals to work in the labor market.

Based on these assumptions, the objective of the current article is to reflect on managerial decision-making as a professional competency of nurses for the in-hospital practice, describing a critical analysis supported by theoretical approaches and the authors' experience in the theme.

## CONTENT

This is a reflective and current study, whose rationale is based on the discursive formulation of managerial decision-making as a professional competence of nurses, supported by national and international literature and by the authors' critical analysis, developed from the following guiding questions: Is managerial decision-making a competency developed by hospital nurses? Which factors interfere in development of this managerial competency by nurses?

This text is presented based on the authors' academic and professional experience, on reading and analysis of national and international scientific publications on the theme, articulated with reflections on the current context, in order to advance in the approach of managerial decision-making as a professional competency of nurses in the hospital setting.

### The hospital context and managerial decision-making as a professional competency of nurses

In hospital care, the work performed by the team of professionals is dynamic and aims at meeting the users' specificities, requiring a comprehensive, reflexive and individualized approach. However, specialized and technician care, with a greater biologist focus, is observed in the hospital environment, which affects work organization and is of a functionalist and piecemeal nature, which concomitantly has negative consequences for those who are being cared for, in addition to not favoring the professionals' creativity, co-accountability and understanding about their own work<sup>7</sup>.

In the hospital context, nurses have to deal with many requirements and tasks with a high degree of demands and responsibilities that, depending on their ability to make decisions, may or may not favor problem-solving. Thus, making decisions in a short period of time is a necessity of hospital organizations.

In this context, working alongside the medical team, nurses sometimes find it difficult to make decisions; one of the factors that can contribute to this problem is the imposition traditionally exercised by the medical profession, in addition to the power relations in which Nursing, a predominantly female profession, is subjected in male-dominated work relationships<sup>8</sup>.

It is necessary to break away with traditionalist impositions that nurses are faced with in order to carry out their activities in a conservative system of hospitals historically rooted in a biomedical management model, intervention reductionist and focused on identifying symptoms and treating diseases<sup>9</sup>, where physicians occupy the highest positions and nurses are restricted to decisions imposed on the interests of the medical class.

It is known that Nursing work should be based on decision-making, whether clinical or managerial. To such end, these professionals should have sufficient knowledge and skills to assess, systematize and act in the most suitable way, all grounded on scientific evidence<sup>10</sup>. In addition to that, the international literature indicates that decision-making is characterized as a competency of a continuous process, in which nurses need to exercise critical thinking, have prior knowledge and, from that, have communicative skills and prioritization of cases to meet the institution's needs in a qualitative way<sup>11</sup>.

Managerial decision-making is a competency of hospital nurses found in their daily work, which makes them highly sought-after professionals for solving problems involving the unit and the care provided to the users, in addition to decision-making based on knowledge helps for assertive and qualified decisions and for visibility in nurses' centrality and their hierarchical relationships<sup>6</sup>.

In this sense, in order to make assertive decisions, nurses initially need to identify the problem, that is, to perform a diagnosis of the situation; then plan the actions, identifying possible difficulties for carrying out the plan, think about options and, finally, be firm and exercise autonomy.

Therefore, decision-making is a fundamental competency for nurses' clinical performance in the hospital context, reason why it should be developed since the initial training in Nursing. In view of this, involving the largest number of professionals in the team in decision-making makes it possible for the choice made to be the most appropriate for the situation, as it allows sharing ideas and thoughts, clinical judgment and validation of care planning, providing safety and quality in each action. When the opposite occurs, that is, processes centered on a few people may lead to decisions that do not support the real needs of the collective<sup>12</sup>.

It is known that hospitals are institutions characterized by the presence of a multiprofessional team that should articulate its diverse knowledge in solving the users' needs. The aforementioned includes making decisions. As managers, nurses are the link between the various professional categories, having to reflect in a very specific and constant way on the best courses of action in such scenario. Thus, when developing the decision-making competency, these professionals need to adopt a performance model that reduces the chances of choosing tendentious and ineffective solutions.

It is worth highlighting the importance of understanding all the aspects that involve the decision-making process and that can assist in the development of activities related to planning, communication, conflict management, supervision and leadership that are inherent to nurses' managerial dimension and, which, if used inappropriately, compromise the quality of the care provided.

### **Factors that interfere in nurses' decision-making**

Nurses' managerial decision-making is subjected to several influences in its process, with a need for a multifaceted research, education and practice approach to achieve satisfactory results. Despite being indispensable and considered vital for the practice of hospital nurses, the decision-making competency is still underused; due to work overload and accumulation of functions, nurses tend to exercise such competency in an intuitive, unplanned and systematized way according to their own clinical reasoning. In addition, if we think about high-complexity sectors such as Intensive Care Units (ICUs), this becomes a potential risk for errors or unsafe actions in the assistance provided<sup>13</sup>.

Thus, it is worth highlighting the obstacles for the development of managerial decision-making by nurses, related to the administrative policy issue in the work environment, to lack of organizational support, to the workday, to the experience time in the sector, and to the relationships between physicians and nurses. When nurses are involved in decision-making in the hospital environment, they promote qualification of the assistance provided to the patients and benefits for the managerial practice<sup>14</sup>.

However, complicated issues are part of a scenario that involves decision-making processes in the hospital environment, such as the use of scientific knowledge by the decision-making professionals, life experiences, values and beliefs. These factors make us reflect on subjective aspects for the decision-making scenario, which transform the

technical knowledge that must be taken into account, as they directly affect decision-making, since it is a complex environment where professionals deal with work overload and hierarchical decisions that can directly interfere with the resolutions to be taken.

In this regard, it is known that these professionals find several barriers within the organization, facing situations that are often conflicting, directly or indirectly interfering in the deliberation of their actions; therefore, they need to focus on the results to make the best decisions and, thus, avoid unnecessary conflicts.

A number of researchers also show that, among the necessary characteristics for nurses to develop the decision-making competency, it is necessary to obtain clear and assertive communication as the main foundation of care, resilience, gain the trust of their Nursing team, ground it on a holistic practice and have shared and innovative leadership<sup>15</sup>.

In addition, for the development of managerial decision-making, it is necessary to constantly update knowledge via one's own means and/or those promoted by the employing institution; validation of care planning; supervise employees; previous experience and providing feedback to the work team<sup>12,16</sup>.

It is verified that experience and professional knowledge train nurses in putting the managerial decision-making competency into practice, with the possibility of acting based on critical thinking. The action of making decisions usually presupposes contiguous attitudes, exposing these professionals to countless issues to be solved during their workday; hence the importance of previous knowledge and using efficient instruments for decision-making.

For professionals who have extensive work experience, it can be verified that they have a better understanding of the decision-making process, knowing how to make appropriate decisions, especially in more complex situations such as in the care provided to critically-ill patients.

Critical thinking is essential in nurses' work and may assist them both in identifying real and potential problems as well as in making decisions about options for an action plan, which impact on the reduction of possible undesirable results. Added to the above, managerial tools that propose alternative solutions should be sought, resorting to creativity so that timely and assertive decisions are made.

Thus, decision-making is evidenced as a major dimension that permeates rational aspects, such as the use of management techniques and the capacity for analysis, interpretation and synthesis, as well as subjective aspects, such as the selection of values and personal experiences, as managerial problems are broader<sup>15</sup>. In this way, the professionals need to identify the problem exposed and, from that point, perform a careful analysis of the best path to be followed to succeed in their decision since, even in the face of constantly experienced situations, the decision-making process can bring about nasty consequences depending on the position to be faced.

Thus, for nurses to be able to put the decision-making process into practice, they need to have a democratic environment, where they can exercise their profession with autonomy, and it is essential that their objectives integrate the mission of the institution in which they work. If the institution does not give autonomy and/or encourage nurses to make coherent and assertive decisions, these professionals will not be able to assume the totality in management of their tasks, even jeopardizing the efficiency of the hospital management as a whole.

In this sense, decision-making shared with the team can be better accepted in view of the objectives established in the work context, as the participants can feel responsible for the activity to be developed, making more efforts so that the goals are achieved with quality. Consequently, the decision-making process should involve the multiprofessional team, enabling democratic participation and not as a vertical and hierarchized imposition<sup>14</sup>.

It is believed that centralizing professionals may not be successful, with co-accountability in problem solving being important, as the opinion of the team contributes a wider range of alternatives, favoring the best course of action to be adopted by nurses in the decision-making processes.

Therefore, this democratic leadership that enables sharing and making the best decisions possible, it can be learned and developed in the practice with experience and knowledge. Leadership is not an exclusive gift inherent to some people; it can be acquired over time with institutional incentives and training.

It is observed that, therefore, for managerial decision-making to be effective, it is necessary to intersect several managerial competencies, and nurses could enjoy better mastery if this topic was initially addressed during their professional training and continued by the employing institution.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The importance of conducting other studies with a view to identifying the managerial decision-making competency for hospital nurses was verified, as there are few published studies on the theme, especially in Brazil, considering decision-making as professional competency.

However, it is noteworthy that, oftentimes and due to the high work demand, nurses delay or make inadequate decisions that may come to generate risks for care safety, which makes this theme extremely relevant to be discussed in the Nursing area, especially in nurses' training. For this purpose, using active learning strategies that turn students into active elements and responsible for an effective decision-making process is important for their training, such as simulations, group dynamics and discussions of real cases, so that the students can actually put this competency into practice and be able to exercise good choices in problem situations that require critical thinking for a more assertive decision-making process.

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