

Managerial Competencies of Nurses in Primary Health Care

Competências Gerenciais do Enfermeiro no Contexto da Atenção Primária à Saúde
Competencias Gerenciales del Enfermero en el Contexto de la Atención Primaria de Salud

RESUMO

Objetivo: Compreender as percepções e as práticas dos enfermeiros no gerenciamento das unidades de Atenção Primária à Saúde (APS) em município da Zona da Mata Mineira. **Método:** Estudo qualitativo conduzido por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas com oito enfermeiros atuantes na APS de março a maio de 2025. **Resultados:** Emergiram as seguintes categorias temáticas: Importância do gerenciamento em enfermagem no contexto da APS; Competências essenciais para o gerenciamento em enfermagem; Aspectos facilitadores e dificultadores para a gerenciamento em enfermagem na APS; A qualificação da prática do gerenciamento em enfermagem: formação acadêmica versus educação permanente. O conhecimento técnico-científico, a comunicação, a liderança e a tomada de decisão foram relatadas como competências essenciais. Os enfermeiros apontaram desafios como sobrecarga de trabalho, falta de recursos, infraestrutura precária e lacunas na formação. **Conclusão:** O gerenciamento em enfermagem é uma atividade complexa e essencial, exigindo contínuo desenvolvimento de competências para assegurar uma assistência de qualidade.

DESCRIPTORES: Atenção Primária à Saúde; Enfermagem de Atenção Primária; Liderança.

ABSTRACT

Objective: To understand the perceptions and practices of nurses in the management of Primary Health Care (PHC) units in a municipality in the Zona da Mata region of Minas Gerais. **Method:** A qualitative study conducted through semi-structured interviews with eight nurses working in PHC from March to May 2025. **Results:** The following thematic categories emerged: Importance of nursing management in the context of PHC; Essential competencies for nursing management; Facilitating and hindering aspects for nursing management in PHC; The qualification of nursing management practice: academic training versus continuing education. Technical-scientific knowledge, communication, leadership, and decision-making were reported as essential competencies. Nurses pointed out challenges such as work overload, lack of resources, poor infrastructure, and gaps in training. **Conclusion:** Nursing management is a complex and essential activity, requiring continuous development of competencies to ensure quality care.

DESCRIPTORS: Primary Health Care; Primary Care Nursing; Leadership.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Comprender las percepciones y prácticas de las enfermeras en la gestión de unidades de Atención Primaria de Salud (APS) en un municipio de la región de Zona da Mata, Minas Gerais. **Método:** Estudio cualitativo realizado mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas con ocho enfermeras que trabajan en APS de marzo a mayo de 2025. **Resultados:** Surgieron las siguientes categorías temáticas: Importancia de la gestión de enfermería en el contexto de la APS; Competencias esenciales para la gestión de enfermería; Aspectos facilitadores y obstáculos para la gestión de enfermería en APS; La cualificación de la práctica de la gestión de enfermería: formación académica versus educación continua. Se reportaron como competencias esenciales el conocimiento técnico-científico, la comunicación, el liderazgo y la toma de decisiones. Las enfermeras señalaron desafíos como la sobrecarga de trabajo, la falta de recursos, la infraestructura deficiente y las brechas en la formación. **Conclusión:** La gestión de enfermería es una actividad compleja y esencial que requiere el desarrollo continuo de competencias para garantizar una atención de calidad.

DESCRIPTORES: Atención Primaria de Salud; Enfermería de Atención Primaria; Liderazgo.

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INTRODUCTION

The National Primary Care Policy (PNAB) establishes guidelines for the organization of Primary Health Care (PHC) in Brazil, with the aim of consolidating its role as the coordinator of health promotion, prevention, and protection actions and services provided within the Health Care Network. Registered nurses are mandatory members of the multidisciplinary team at basic health units (UBS), where they work in accordance with the principles and guidelines of the SUS ⁽¹⁾.

The quality of health care varies across different macro-regions depending on the population size and the level of socioeconomic deprivation in the municipalities ⁽²⁾. This underscores the importance of the organization and management of health services, with the aim of ensuring the population has access to high-quality health care, in order to overcome the

challenges present in the Brazilian context ⁽²⁾.

Law No. 7,498, dated June 25, 1986, regulates the practice of nursing and assigns to nurses, among other duties, the planning, organization, coordination, implementation, and evaluation of nursing care services ⁽³⁾. Thus, nursing consultations and health service management are listed as the primary functions of nurses in the context of primary health care ⁽⁴⁾. However, it is essential to break down the care-management dichotomy in nursing practice, as it is necessary to understand managerial practice as an intrinsic component of the nursing work process and, above all, as a facilitator of care practice ⁽⁵⁾.

In this context, the complexity of the managerial role becomes clear, requiring that nurses be trained to ensure excellence in the performance of their duties. The research is therefore justified by the need to investigate aspects related to nursing management

and the competencies of professional nurses. Given this, the research question is: "How do nurses perceive and develop management-related practices in primary health care (PHC)?" Thus, this study aims to understand the perceptions and practices of nurses in the management of PHC units in a municipality in the Zona da Mata Mineira region.

METHOD

This is an exploratory study with a qualitative approach. The choice of a qualitative research approach was made because it encompasses the subjective and relational aspects of social reality, which are thus examined through the history, context, meanings, motivations, beliefs, values, and attitudes of the social actors involved ⁽⁶⁾.

The study was conducted in a municipality in the Zona da Mata region of Minas Gerais, which has 16 prima-

ry health care centers, all operating under the Family Health Strategy. All nurses working in primary health care centers were included in the study, regardless of their length of service at the center. All professionals who were on leave during the data collection period and those who refused to participate in the study were excluded. In total, 8 nurses were interviewed.

Data collection took place from March through May 2025, using a semistructured interview guide developed by the researchers that addressed issues related to nurses' managerial skills and competencies in Primary Health Care. All interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed in full. To preserve anonymity, participants were referred to by the letter E (nurse), followed by a number corresponding to the order in which the interviews were conducted. All study participants signed an informed consent form.

For data analysis, Bardin's content analysis technique was employed, which involves the following phases: in the first stage, a preliminary analysis was conducted to formulate the hypotheses and initial research objectives, aiming to familiarize the researcher with the subject matter and thereby facilitate the interpretation of the participants' statements and the organization of ideas. The second stage involved coding, in which the data collected from the interviews were systematically processed and grouped into units, allowing for an accurate description of the statements classified as relevant in the interview. The third stage involved inference and interpretation, highlighting the information provided by the interview through thematic axes, interpreting them in light of the scientific literature⁽⁷⁾.

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee for Human Subjects at the sponsoring Federal University (Opinion No.: 7,510,830

and CAAE: 86465325.6.0000.5153).

RESULTS

After analyzing the interviews, the following thematic categories emerged: The importance of nursing management in the context of primary health care; Essential competencies for nursing management; Facilitating and hindering factors for nursing management in primary health care; The qualification of nursing management practice: academic training versus continuing education.

Importance of nursing management in the context of PHC

Nursing management is understood as a fundamental element in the PHC work process. In this study, participants defined it as the coordination of the unit's internal processes, integrating administrative, organizational, and care-related actions that ensure service efficiency, the resolution of the population's needs, and the achievement of goals set by health programs. As reflected in the statements below:

It's about taking charge, organizing, aligning, setting goals, striving to achieve them, and following rules.(E7)

It is important to emphasize that management is not conceived as an separate from the care process, but as an essential component for ensuring the quality of the service provided.

It's like a well-oiled machine—everything working together at the same time. You can't just say, "Now I'm going to provide care, and now I'm just going to manage." It's truly interconnected. (E7)

The testimonials highlighted the health service's planning and administrative activities—such as monitoring staff attendance, preparing duty schedules, and organizing workflows—as the primary managerial

actions in the day-to-day operations of primary health care. In addition, participants emphasized the coordination of the nursing team, the organization of patient intake and the vaccination room, the planning of community health workers' activities, and the coordination of home visits as the primary tasks performed by nurses. The management of the facility's supplies was also cited as an essential managerial function for the service.

Nursing management is everything in a health facility. Without management, the facility turns into a mess. Starting with the supply room—what comes in, what

From patient visits to doctor's appointments—how many patients the doctor sees—I have to keep an eye on it. As for the public health workers, how many home visits are they making, are they keeping up, and are they meeting the target set by the ministry? So management is what makes the Family Health Program (ESF) work. (E1)

Essential Competencies for Nursing Management

As shown in the statement below, nurses need technical and scientific knowledge to perform their managerial duties effectively.

To reiterate, a great deal of technical and practical knowledge is required, because in order to ask your staff—especially the nursing team—to perform specific tasks, you must also know how to perform them yourself. (E2)

Communication is highlighted in the participants' statements as a fundamental skill for nurses, as it is closely related to maintaining good interpersonal relationships.

It's important to have good communication skills so that you can build good relationships with the team and with managers. (E2)

The statements revealed that leadership and decision-making are essential pillars in the daily work process of

nurses, as described below:

Primary care nurses need to have skills, particularly in leadership and decision-making. (E4)

The participants highlighted the importance of a strategic vision—that is, being attentive to all elements related to the care process.

You have to understand all the logistics and how the system works, and have a thorough understanding of national primary care policy in order to do your job well and provide excellent care to patients. (E2)

Factors that Facilitate and Hinder Nursing Management in Primary Health Care

Some participants encountered difficulties in identify facilitating aspects of the nurse's managerial process in primary health care, as shown in the statement below:

“Oh, there's nothing easy about it. There are only difficulties. Only demands.” (E8)

However, some aspects were identified as opportunities. Among them, autonomy stands out as a fundamental element for the practice of the profession.

Among the facilitating factors, I highlight the autonomy that nurses have to organize workflows, plan health interventions, and propose improvements in care. (E4)

Some statements also highlighted team support as a facilitating factor for nursing management.

If you have a good team, coordinating is very easy. Managing is very easy. Because we don't do everything on our own. We need the team to be able to work. (E8)

While team support is seen as a facilitating factor, the lack of teamwork is considered a major obstacle in the context of primary health care.

Unanimously, interpersonal dynamics among the service's multidisciplinary team are cited as key obstacles that determine the quality of the work process.

I think it's the professionals. People management within the unit, in my view, is the most complicated bottleneck. I think the biggest shortcoming we have in providing truly high-quality care stems largely from this. (E3)

Another aspect identified as a challenge was the lack of management support, which is seen as a major obstacle to ensuring the quality of the work. Participants cited a lack of dialogue, feedback, and technical support, as well as a shortage of material resources, as the main difficulties they faced.

So, a lack of resources, a lack of feedback from management, and a lack of support from management itself. (E7)

The physical structure of the health care system is also recognized as a factor that hinders the nursing management process. The participants reveal that units housed in rented buildings present a daily challenge:

The fact that the unit is a converted house ends up complicating this management issue, you know? Because sometimes there are professionals providing care at the same time, and there aren't enough rooms. So those are the issues. (E2)

Participants also identified work overload and the accumulation of duties as factors that compromise the quality of care and nursing management in primary health care.

I think it really overloads nurses, you know? Because every day there's a new role for nursing. It just keeps piling on, piling on. Then there's patient care, and management. And so, I think it ends up overburdening the nurse. (E3)

The Qualification of Nursing Management Practice: Academic

Training versus Continuing Education

Given the importance of nursing management in the nurse's work process, the curriculum of the nursing program includes courses that address this topic. However, the participants' statements reinforce the importance of experience and the development of nursing management skills. Some participants considered academic training in the managerial domain to be insufficient or superficial when compared to the clinical care dimension.

I realize that management training was more limited compared to the clinical care aspect. My deeper understanding in this field actually came from professional practice and the training courses I sought after graduation. (E4)

Participants also revealed that municipal administration offers training to enhance professionals' skills in the managerial aspect; however, such training is less frequent compared to updates on care protocols.

We receive much more training in the care aspect than in management.

DISCUSSION

Nursing management can be understood as the coordination of nursing care with the goal of ensuring the effectiveness and efficiency of care⁽⁸⁾. A qualitative study conducted in a municipality in Minas Gerais described nursing management as an essential element for the administration of health services. The authors define this function as the coordination of work processes, as well as the management of human and material resources⁽⁹⁾.

Nurses must have a broad perspective on their scope of practice, understanding the inherent intersection of clinical, administrative, and educational activities⁽¹⁰⁾. Thus, it is understood that nurses' practice is crucial to the efficiency of health services

and to the consolidation of primary health care (PHC) as the gateway to the health system ⁽¹¹⁾.

The testimonies of the participants in this study align with the findings in the literature regarding the central role of nursing management in the work process within the health care system, as well as its conception as a practice that involves coordinating work in conjunction with the planning and management of available material resources and staff ⁽¹¹⁾.

With regard to PHC, the National Primary Care Policy describes the nurse's responsibilities as managing and evaluating the actions carried out by nursing technicians and community health workers, in conjunction with other team members, and implementing and maintaining up-to-date routines, protocols, and workflows related to their area of expertise in PHC ⁽¹²⁾.

In addition, a 2020 study aimed at describing the management practices of nurses working in primary health care identified planning, organization, personnel and materials management, and evaluation of the quality of care as the main managerial activities of a nurse ⁽¹³⁾. Thus, there is a clear alignment between the main activities performed by the interviewed professionals and those described in other studies conducted in Brazil within the context of primary health care.

The aforementioned importance of management in nursing requires certain competencies on the part of the professional so that they can perform their duties with quality and safety ⁽¹⁴⁾. Resolution CNE/CES No. 3, dated November 7, 2001, establishes the National Curriculum Guidelines for the Undergraduate Nursing Program, which require, among other things, the following skills and competencies: decision-making, communication, leadership, and management ⁽¹⁵⁾.

Furthermore, an integrative systematic review describes the main

managerial competencies found in the literature, namely: leadership, teamwork, planning, communication, technical and scientific knowledge, managing change and conflict, resilience, autonomy, problem-solving, conflict management, group motivation, assertiveness, negotiation, creativity, and strategic vision ⁽¹³⁾. The present study identified similarities between the literature and the participants' accounts.

Nurses, therefore, must possess both *soft skills* and *hard skills* to perform managerial duties. The former refers to a set of personal and behavioral competencies, while the latter relates to the worker's technical knowledge. Nurses must draw upon their body of technical and scientific knowledge to promote evidence-based practice within their teams. This approach is employed by nurses during times of crisis, when it is necessary to ensure the safety and quality of care while overcoming environmental adversities ⁽¹⁶⁾.

Leadership is understood as an essential competency in the nursing work process. It can be understood as the art of influencing people to act in a certain way to achieve a common goal ⁽¹⁰⁾. In the context of primary health care (PHC), the nurse is recognized as the unit manager and, therefore, must empower themselves with their function and exercise leadership with the goal of ensuring the effectiveness of the services provided by the UBS ⁽¹⁷⁾. As a leader, the nurse must be able to motivate the team, communicate effectively, listen actively, and demonstrate sound judgment in strategic decision-making ⁽¹⁸⁾.

Communication is also an extremely important *soft skill* for nursing practice, recognized as a key factor in the safety and effectiveness of health care. Communication involves a set of messages that facilitates mutual understanding in a dynamic, two-way manner. Collaborative and effective communica-

tion must be based on active listening, empathy, assertiveness, emotional intelligence, and adapting to the other person's language ⁽¹⁹⁾.

Managing primary health care (PHC) is a complex task, marked by both facilitators and obstacles to its performance. This complexity stems from the fact that PHC is recognized as the gateway to the Brazilian health care system, with the responsibility of ensuring universal, comprehensive, equitable, efficient, and effective care for the population ⁽²⁰⁾. Understanding professionals' perspectives on the challenges and opportunities they encounter in their daily work is an important tool for the management process and for developing strategies to improve the current situation ⁽²¹⁾.

Professional autonomy in the workplace is considered a facilitator of the nursing management process and is recognized as an important factor for professional satisfaction and well-being. The professional's leading role in the work process is evident in their ability to organize workflows, plan health interventions, and propose improvements in care, enabling nurses to recognize the scope of their work and its due importance. This sense of autonomy positively influences professionals' motivation and engagement, contributing to the strengthening of the nursing identity ⁽²²⁾.

In addition, studies point to the support of the multidisciplinary team, as well as municipal management, as factors that facilitate nursing management ⁽²³⁾. Furthermore, a lack of financial, human, and material resources, conflicts among health care staff, inadequate infrastructure, and professional burnout are the main challenges faced by nurse managers in the primary health care (PHC) setting ⁽²⁰⁾. A study conducted with nurses working in PHC revealed that deficiencies in physical infrastructure, human resources, and supplies, as well as high workloads and problems relat-

ed to municipal management, result in dissatisfaction and burnout among professionals ⁽²⁴⁾.

The complexity of teamwork is also a factor that can be seen as an obstacle in the work process. Data from a study conducted on this topic reveal that a lack of collaboration among team members is detrimental to the work environment, as it results in low productivity and an excessive workload for certain professionals. Miscommunication and personal conflicts are described as factors that weaken interpersonal relationships ⁽²⁴⁾.

Given the importance of nursing management to the work process in the health care system, there is a clear need for academic training that emphasizes this topic. Studies reveal that there are limitations in the nursing education process—both in the areas of patient care and management—which are related to the difficulty of coordinating between educational institutions and the SUS itself. Exposing students to practical settings is essential for them to consolidate their knowl-

edge and practice safely ⁽¹⁴⁾.

It is therefore necessary to promote a culture of continuous learning, with the aim of enhancing nurses' managerial performance ⁽²⁵⁾. In this context, Administrative Order No. 8,284, dated October 20, 2025, represents a step forward for professional practice, as it mandates continuing education in health within primary health care (PHC) ⁽²⁶⁾.

Determination, perseverance, and willpower are essential for nursing graduates to overcome the adversities they face during their undergraduate studies and to continually strive to improve their professional practice through continuing education and the lessons learned from daily experience ⁽²⁷⁾. Thus, it is the professional's role to expand their knowledge beyond the undergraduate level and apply that knowledge strategically according to their workplace. In addition to the personal effort that each nurse must make to promote professional development, the testimonials point to gaps regarding incentives from mu-

nicipal management for professional development at the managerial level.

CONCLUSION

This study identified the perceptions and practices associated with nursing management in the context of primary health care (PHC). The nurse's managerial role is recognized as central to the healthcare process, responsible for ensuring the quality of care.

The study contributes to an understanding of the importance and complexity of nursing management, highlighting strengths and weaknesses in the professional's role within the PHC context. The central role of nurses in the healthcare work process underscores the need for academic training that applies concepts of planning, organization, direction, and control of healthcare services, with a focus on leadership and quality, as well as the promotion of the enhancement of their competencies and skills and the improvement of working conditions.

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