

**Effective communication in primary care from the perspective of nursing students: a qualitative study**

*Comunicación efectiva en la atención primaria desde la perspectiva de los estudiantes de enfermería:  
un estudio cualitativo*

*Comunicação efetiva na atenção primária sob a ótica de discentes de enfermagem: estudo qualitativo*

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**Abstract**

The aim was to characterize effective communication actions in the teaching of Patient Safety aimed at primary care in an Undergraduate Nursing Course, from the student's perspective. Descriptive-exploratory and qualitative research, whose data were collected between December 2020 and March 2021, through an online questionnaire and addressed by the Thematic-Categorical Content Analysis. Participated 31 students who pointed out the teaching of Patient Safety still concentrated in theoretical classes, with a focus on hospital care and little addressed in primary care. Students' understanding of effective communication in primary care was related to user-accessible and interprofessional communication through electronic medical records. Students understand effective communication as a Patient Safety action. Its approach goes beyond hospital care and in practical scenarios to promote the quality of care and Patient Safety also in primary care.

**Descriptors:** Patient Safety; Education, Nursing; Communication; Quality of Healthcare; Primary Health Care.

**Resumen**

El objetivo fue caracterizar acciones de comunicación efectivas en la enseñanza de la Seguridad del Paciente dirigidas a la atención primaria en un Curso de Graduación en Enfermería, desde la perspectiva del estudiante. Investigación descriptiva-exploratoria y cualitativa, cuyos datos fueron recolectados entre diciembre de 2020 y marzo de 2021, a través de un cuestionario en línea y abordado por el Análisis de Contenido Temático-Categorial. Participaron 31 alumnos que señalaron la enseñanza de la Seguridad del Paciente todavía concentrada en clases teóricas, con foco en la atención hospitalaria y poco abordada en la atención primaria. La comprensión de los estudiantes sobre la comunicación efectiva en la atención primaria se relacionó con la comunicación interprofesional y accesible para el usuario a través de registros médicos electrónicos. Los estudiantes entienden la comunicación efectiva como una acción de Seguridad del Paciente. Su enfoque va más allá de la atención hospitalaria y en escenarios prácticos para promover la calidad de la atención y la Seguridad del Paciente también en la atención primaria.

**Descriptores:** Seguridad del Paciente; Educación en Enfermería; Comunicación; Calidad de la Atención de Salud; Atención Primaria de Salud.

**Resumo**

Objetivou-se caracterizar as ações de comunicação efetiva no ensino da Segurança do Paciente voltadas à atenção primária em um Curso de Graduação em Enfermagem, sob a ótica discente. Pesquisa descritiva-exploratória e qualitativa, cujos dados foram coletados entre dezembro de 2020 e março de 2021, por meio de questionário online e abordados pela Análise de Conteúdo Temático-Categorial. Participaram 31 discentes que apontaram o ensino da Segurança do Paciente ainda concentrado em aulas teóricas, com foco na atenção hospitalar e pouco abordado na atenção primária. A compreensão discente sobre comunicação efetiva na atenção primária relacionou-se à comunicação acessível ao usuário e interprofissional pelo prontuário eletrônico. Os discentes compreendem a comunicação efetiva como uma ação de Segurança do Paciente. Pontua-se a sua abordagem para além da atenção hospitalar e em cenários práticos para o fomento da qualidade do cuidado e Segurança do Paciente também na atenção primária.

**Descritores:** Segurança do Paciente; Ensino de Enfermagem; Comunicação; Qualidade da Assistência à Saúde; Atenção Primária à Saúde.

## Introduction

Patient Safety is a topic of worldwide relevance in recent years. In 2004, the World Health Organization (WHO) created the World Alliance for Patient Safety, which aims to organize concepts, definitions and measures about patient safety to enhance actions aimed at safe and quality care. In 2011, to promote specific improvements in complex areas of health, the WHO established six international safety goals, among which Effective Communication stands out in order to ensure that verbal and recorded information is timely, accurate and complete<sup>1,2</sup>.

Following the global trend, in Brazil (BR) the National Patient Safety Program (PNSP) was implemented in 2013 by the Ministry of Health, which focuses on qualifying the care offered to users of health services throughout the national territory; by encouraging safe care practice, teaching and research on the topic<sup>3</sup>.

It is noteworthy that, for a long time, Patient Safety actions focused on the hospital area, understanding it as a place with a greater probability of adverse events, despite the need to increase the patient safety culture in Primary Health Care (PHC). The apprehension of enhancing safety actions in the field of PHC, while offering more quality and safer care, point to the need for further research on the subject in that field. An integrative review study on the occurrence of incidents in PHC showed that about 1 to 24 incidents occur every 100 consultations and that, of these incidents, 4% can cause serious damage, causing physical and psychological problems<sup>4,5</sup>.

In this context, in Brazil (BR) it is noted that 63,933 adverse events related to health care were recorded in the period from June/2014 to June/2016, of which 417 (0.6%) evolved to death. This justifies the commitment of these actions in hospital care; however, it does not justify the scarcity of studies in PHC. With regard to PHC, the main adverse events identified came from medication and medical diagnosis errors; as for the most relevant incident contributing factors, communication failures among health team members stand out, with 53% of incident contributing factors found in the research<sup>6-8</sup>.

According to the Ministry of Health<sup>9</sup>, the effective Communication aims to "seek to improve communication between professionals, ensuring the transmission of information in a complete way and with the guarantee of understanding of all those involved". Communication becomes effective when the meaning intended by the "speaker/ sender" and the meaning that the "listener/receiver" perceives are the same. For it to occur safely, there must be a response and validation of the information issued.

In this sense, studies that discuss communication between professionals become important, in addition to communication with users of different health services. In PHC, this can have a special effect, as it is the point of the Health Care Network (RAS) that has the following attributes: teamwork; longitudinality and coordination of care; and community orientation. Thus, two dimensions are important to enhance Patient Safety actions: the first refers to Permanent Education and awareness of health

professionals; and the second, to health training in undergraduate courses. It is noticed that thinking about health education focused on the quality of care and safety is a challenge in undergraduate courses<sup>10</sup>.

It should be noted that students in the health area, when developing their practical activities in health services, are also subject to factors that can culminate in adverse events, such as: organizational; deficit of information and professionals; psychological and physical stress; and activity overload. It is emphasized that such factors must be addressed during the training process, considering that the teaching of patient safety is still related to empiricism, to something punctual and non-procedural, requiring further theoretical-scientific deepening<sup>11</sup>.

Thus, the guiding question of the research was outlined: What are the effective communication actions in the teaching of Patient Safety aimed at PHC in an Undergraduate Nursing Course, from the student's perspective? Therefore, the following objective was to characterize effective communication actions in the teaching of Patient Safety aimed at primary care in an Undergraduate Nursing Course, from the student's perspective.

## Methodology

This is a descriptive-exploratory research, with a qualitative approach, developed with nursing students from a Nursing Undergraduate Course at a Federal University located in the State of Rio de Janeiro (RJ), BR. The organization of the Curriculum Network of the mentioned course has a workload distributed in ten periods; covers a list of compulsory and optional subjects; curricular supervised internship in the last year of graduation; and complementary activities. The specific syllabus on Patient Safety has an optional subject, offered to students from the 4th period of the Nursing Undergraduate Course.

It is noted that the research team includes professors with experience in the qualitative approach and teaching on Patient Safety. However, the conduction of data collection was carried out by a student of the Undergraduate Course in question, as a research assistant. In addition, the collection took place in a period when the students invited to participate were not in disciplines, under the responsibility of the research professors.

The following inclusion criteria were used for the participants: students enrolled in the Undergraduate Nursing Course at that institution; attending the last year of graduation; who had completed the mandatory curricular internship or non-compulsory internship at APS.

Data collection took place from December 2020 to March 2021, and took place through a questionnaire prepared on the Google Forms® platform, which also included an invitation letter and the Free Informed Consent Term (ICF). The first part of the questionnaire covered questions related to the characterization of the participants, such as: gender, age and opportunity to experience Patient Safety during health education. The second part referred to issues related to actions in favor of the Patient Safety culture and effective communication, regarding the students'



experiences in theoretical and practical teaching, in the PHC scenario. The link to publicize the survey was sent in the instant messaging application groups to a total of 90 potential participants. Consent was obtained by indicating acceptance in the ICF.

Thematic-category content analysis was carried out through the following steps: skimming of the questionnaire responses; definition of provisional hypotheses about the object studied; determination of Registration Units (UR) from phrases; constitution of Meaning Units (US); and construction of three thematic categories<sup>12</sup>. These steps were performed by 02 members of the research team in order to ensure the verification of data integrity. As well as your encoding. It is noteworthy that 31 students participated in the research, however from the questionnaire number 13, there was no construction of new HUs, from the selection of RUs, in the research corpus, constituting the saturation point of the sampling.

This research, approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO), obtained opinion number 4,453,741 and CAAE 40802220.0.0000.5285. To ensure anonymity, the questionnaires received the letter "P" followed by numbering in order of the participants' responses. The data was downloaded from the cloud, after the end of the data collection, to ensure its security.

## Results

Among the 31 students who participated in the survey, 28 are female and were, on average, 23 years old. Most of the participants, 27, identified that they experienced the Patient Safety theme in the PHC scenario in the curricular internship, while 4 experienced it through the non-mandatory internship.

With regard to the discussion of the topic Patient Safety during graduation, 29 participants confirmed its occurrence. When asked about the professionals who provided the opportunity to discuss the topic in question, there were 30 references to the professors of the Undergraduate course; 19 references to health professionals in theoretical classes; 19 references to professionals in health services and 16 references to other students.

Next, the results from the analysis of categorical thematic content are presented, through the selection of 198 URs, which were grouped into 26 HUs, and consisted of three categories called: "Patient Safety Teaching", "Student understanding: effective communication actions" and "Actions developed by students aimed at effective communication in PHC".

### Teaching Patient Safety

This category has a total of 103 (52.02%) of the URs and is composed of 2 subcategories, the first focused on teaching Patient Safety in secondary and tertiary care; and the second referring to teaching in PHC. The first category is characterized by themes related to the teaching of Patient Safety developed in theoretical and practical classes, extension activities and academic leagues, addressed in

mandatory curricular internship or non-mandatory internship.

It is noteworthy that the subcategory related to the teaching of Patient Safety in secondary and tertiary care has the highest number of RUs, 30.43% of the total number of selected units compared to the teaching of this subject in PHC.

When asked about the teaching of Patient Safety in their training, the participants indicated teaching aimed at the hospital setting, as seen below.

*"[...] took place in an Adult and Elderly Health Care class and covered patient safety in a hospital setting" (P24).*

*"Tertiary care. In a dynamic carried out by the professionals responsible for the continuing education of the hospital" (P30).*

It was also identified that the teaching of Patient Safety has theoretical classes as a teaching-learning strategy. The classroom is the main environment for discussion on the subject. As we can see in the following reports:

*"It was in a theoretical class, where patient safety goals were addressed" (P31).*

*"[Topic addressed in] Theoretical classes during graduation, but more focused on the hospital environment" (P10).*

For the participants of this research, teaching related to Patient Safety can also be experienced from the mandatory curricular internships, academic league events and participation in extension projects, as portrayed in the following answers:

*"During the internship at HU. The teacher entered the ward and identified a risky behavior. In view of this, we started a discussion related to the topic" (P14).*

*"[The discussion took place] in some meetings of academic leagues" (P1).*

*"[The discussion took place] during the internship in nursing consultations and during extension activities" (P6).*

With regard to the subcategory focused on teaching Patient Safety in PHC, it is noteworthy that the students responded that the topic was not addressed or was rarely addressed in this context. When addressed, participants related it to the goals of patient identification, effective communication, hand hygiene and correct vaccination checks.

*"The professors responsible for supervising the internship started the discussion about how Patient Safety actions took place during the vaccination campaign, which was the activity we were doing the most [...]" (P29).*

*"Hand hygiene and safe medication administration workshops" (P17).*

The importance of reflecting on the theme in PHC and the concentration of Patient Safety teaching in hospital care was also present in the responses of the participants.

*"Discussions regarding primary care is still a paradigm that must be deconstructed, as the topic of patient safety is still not solid*



and well defined in the field. [...] the topic of patient safety is not yet seen by health professionals [from PHC] compared to the hospital environment" (P21).

"I try to make the patient understand what my recommendations are for his case and for him to repeat it to show me that he understands" (P15).

"One experience I remember in this regard is, during a consultation, realizing that the way the nurse spoke was not accessible to the patient. When we started to approach him in a simpler way he understood his health situation" (P13).

In this sense, the analysis of the questionnaires showed that the teaching of Patient Safety, in the scenario of this research, is focused on theoretical classes with a focus on hospital care, and its discussion in PHC is still incipient.

With regard to the recording of information and effective communication between professionals, it should be noted that the use of electronic medical records was pointed out as a mediator of effective communication in PHC, with regard to the exchange of information about patients between the health professionals.

### Student understanding: effective communication actions

The students' understanding of effective communication actions consisted of 52 URs (26.71%), presented through two subcategories. The first subcategory encompasses the following themes: effective communication between professionals, patients and family members; communication accessible to the patient; and interpersonal relationships, as explained in the selected URs:

"In my internship I saw a lot of oral communication and electronic patient records between professionals, in my view it was effective" (P12).

"Good communication between staff and patient. Mutual communication, exchanges" (P4).

"In the moments when I was in practice, I was able to fill in and see professionals filling out the medical records in the eSUS. The program is a facilitator for efficient communication between the team responsible for the user, however, it is up to the professional to fill in the fields properly, being accurate in their registration" (P28).

"I think we have to listen to what the patient already understands and from that feedback to smooth the edges, that is, improve his preconception" (P7).

The second subcategory highlighted actions aimed at the quality of health information records. In this subcategory, the following themes stood out: effective recording of information about patients; avoid verbal drug prescriptions; double-checking of medications, correct identification of patients and the adoption of communication tools.

### Discussion

Through the analysis of thematic-category content, it was identified that, in the study scenario, the theme Patient Safety is present during the Undergraduate course and focuses on theoretical classes focused on hospital care, with teaching in PHC still incipient.

"Objective and complete record in medical records. [As an effective communication action]" (P23).

"Verification of right medication for the right patient, right procedure on the right patient" (P4).

The concern with the teaching of Patient Safety is present in the scientific literature. Attention is paid to the discussion regarding the inclusion of teaching this theme in the training of nurses, in six higher education institutions in Rio Grande do Sul (RS), BR, in a segmented way into several disciplines, which does not allow for a deeper understanding of the theme, causing gaps in the teaching-learning process<sup>13,14</sup>.

Effective communication actions, for the students participating in this research, permeate the provision of safe care, through communication between health professionals and between professionals and patients of health services. In addition, participants were concerned about the quality of health records, with the aim of providing clear, timely and effective information.

Another important aspect in the analysis of the questionnaires was the identification of teaching opportunities focused on Patient Safety, such as extension activities and academic leagues; compulsory curricular and non-mandatory internships. A study carried out with students in the health area of a university located in the southern region of BR, demonstrated the importance of practice scenarios, in addition to the theoretical environment, highlighting that the teaching of this theme needs to be reinforced in the curriculum, in the articulation between theory and practice<sup>14</sup>.

### Actions developed by students aimed at effective communication in PHC

The third category is composed of 43 URs (21.71%) highlights the experiences lived by students related to effective communication in PHC. The themes were highlighted: registration of information about patients; active listening and information to the patient about everything related to the monitoring of their health; inform through health education; patient feedback on what was explained; and communication between professionals in an effective and constant way in PHC.

With regard to the teaching of Patient Safety in PHC, for the students participating in this research, it is still a challenge, identified through the responses regarding the theme as little or not addressed in that field of care. Factors such as the lack of scientific production on the subject and the lack of knowledge of PHC professionals on the subject may be related to the low knowledge about Patient Safety in that field of care<sup>4</sup>.

In this category, it was evidenced that the students' experiences are related to the patient's understanding of the professional's orientation and the need to use more accessible language, so that communication becomes, in fact, effective. As presented in the URs, below.

It is noteworthy that promoting health training, focused on Patient Safety in PHC, provides an opportunity to expand the debate on the subject, which can enhance the



perspective of future health professionals, beyond hospital care. It should be noted that the nurse presents himself as the main professional who works in the identification of errors and incident prevention<sup>15</sup>, sometimes being a protective barrier.

However, despite the students' answers, presenting the teaching of Patient Safety focused on hospital care and little focused on primary care, its importance was identified from the analysis of the questionnaires. Thus, when identifying the themes in the referred field of attention, the participants related to effective communication; patient identification, hand hygiene, and correct vaccination checks. A study carried out in the United Kingdom showed that interprofessional communication and effective communication between patients and health teams is fundamental for the practice of Patient Safety in primary care, being identified as the key to the provision of safe primary health care practices<sup>16</sup>.

As for student understanding related to effective communication actions, this was presented by the participants as one of the main goals of Patient Safety. The students presented interprofessional communication, with language accessible to patients and the quality of records, as actions that facilitate the goal of effective communication.

It is known that effective communication is essential for teamwork and for the provision of quality and safe care, due to the potential sharing of essential information for the continuity of health care and ensuring the safety of service users of health. It is noteworthy that communication actions are enhanced through team meetings, quality registration in the electronic medical record and good interpersonal relationships<sup>16-20</sup>.

In team meetings, there is open dialogue and the search for solutions to situations imposed in daily work. As for the quality record, through the constant and correct use of electronic medical records, information about patients is exchanged efficiently. Communication is also effective through a good interpersonal relationship where dialogue, considered one of the main tools for its consolidation in the interprofessional context, is encouraged<sup>18-20</sup>.

In a study developed on Patient Safety culture with students of Nursing and Medicine courses at a university in Santa Catarina (SC), BR, effective communication had higher levels of confidence in learning related to this domain<sup>21</sup>. Regarding the actions developed by students aimed at effective communication in PHC during the undergraduate course, the present study identified that the records in the electronic medical record acted as a facilitator of communication between the team. As well as communication with users through health education and feedback to the patient about what he was instructed to do.

Such results were also presented in a study carried out in the southern region of BR on the understanding of nursing students about Patient Safety. Participants reported feeling confident about their actions when there is an effective exchange of information and proper recording of information, which demonstrates the importance of an effective communication approach. An integrative review study on effective communication in PHC showed that this

goal is a key tool for Patient Safety, because, in this field of care, teamwork is constant, making it necessary that there are no gaps in this process. There is also an exchange of knowledge and practices between the multidisciplinary team, due to the formation of the bond between the team, the user and his family. It is known that communication between professionals and patients/family members is essential for the continuity of care and patient safety<sup>22-24</sup>.

The students participating in this research also presented the electronic medical record as an important communication tool among health professionals; and between them and the users. In PHC, the use of the Electronic Patient Record (PEP) has become a great ally in this process, as it is one of the tools of multiprofessional communication. However, it is essential that the entire team is qualified to use it, as factors such as the difficulty of professionals in adapting to new information technologies tend to weaken this process, which is responsible for bringing efficiency and safety to the care provided to the population<sup>19</sup>.

Participants also reported the interpersonal relationship with the patient and health education as an effective communication experience in PHC. Health education is relevant in PHC, because through it communication and dialogue with the population occur, where health care can be shared, providing people with co-responsibility for their care, treatment and recovery process<sup>25</sup>.

Thus, the analysis developed in this investigation highlighted the importance of teaching effective communication for Patient Safety in PHC, without forgetting that its teaching still focuses on hospital care, addressed through theoretical classes. The approach to the theme in PHC must be expanded so that its teaching is present in all points of the RAS, as none of them is exempt from the occurrence of adverse events. Even though teamwork and the bond with the user are intrinsic to the role of nurses in PHC, incidents related to communication are still the biggest cause of adverse events in that scenario<sup>8</sup>.

The limitation of the research is related to the fact that it was carried out only in an Undergraduate Nursing Course, not being possible to generalize its results. In addition to the development from an online questionnaire, without identification of the participants, it is not possible to return the same for the deepening of some open questions.

### Final Considerations

This article achieved the proposed objective, by characterizing the actions of effective communication in the teaching of Patient Safety, in an Undergraduate Nursing Course, from the student's perspective as communication that permeates the interpersonal relationship between the user, professionals and family; and interprofessional through the registration of information in the PEP. It is about the importance of the quality of the record, active listening, communication through health education and among the team and the use of accessible language.

As for the teaching of Patient Safety in the study scenario, the actions focus on theoretical teaching with a



focus on hospital care and little focused on PHC, with teaching-learning opportunities also through academic leagues, extension projects, extracurricular internships and curricula.

Fostering discussion about the process of effective communication at different points of care is essential to reduce the occurrence of adverse events related to failure in the communication process. It is necessary to teach Patient Safety focused on the primary care scenario, through theoretical and practical experiences, thus providing effective teaching on the subject.

It is pointed out as contributions of this study to Nursing, to provide a discussion about the teaching of Patient Safety in undergraduate courses, to encourage debate on the subject in PHC and to pay attention to teaching about effective communication in the production of quality and safe care in that field of attention. The importance of expanding research to other courses in the health area and other universities, public and private, is highlighted, in order to understand the reality of this teaching in these institutions and, thus, enhance the dissemination of scientific production on the Patient Safety subject.

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