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ADVANCED PRACTICE NURSING AND THE ACTIONS PERFORMED BY NURSES: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

Enfermagem de prática avançada e as ações realizadas por enfermeiros: estudo analítico
Enfermería de práctica avanzada y las acciones realizadas por enfermeros: un estudio analítico

Bianca Silva de Moraes Freire¹ 
Yasmim Ribeiro Fracaroli² 
Francini Castilha do Nascimento³ 
Andreia Cristina Barbosa Costa⁴ 
Cristiane Giffoni Braga⁵ 
Isabelle Cristinne Pinto Costa⁶ 

RESUMO

Objetivo: analisar as ações com potencial para Enfermagem de Prática Avançada segundo o conhecimento, formação e uso do processo de enfermagem por enfermeiros do sul de Minas Gerais. **Método:** estudo analítico, transversal, com abordagem quantitativa e amostra não probabilística. **Resultados:** dos 140 participantes, 48% referiram ter pouco ou nenhum conhecimento, 36% intermediário e 15% moderado ou alto. A maioria (83,5%) relatou realizar atividades de práticas avançadas; a mais frequente do domínio do cuidado foi a avaliação de feridas e prescrição de curativos (65,71%); no domínio gestão/educação foi participação em reuniões para elaboração e implantação de protocolos de prevenção de riscos e danos (50%). **Considerações finais:** as ações relacionadas ao domínio do cuidado e domínio de gestão/educação relatadas por participantes têm potencial para serem descritas como de prática avançada, em que pese o nível de conhecimento que a amostra evidenciou sobre tal tipo de prática.

^{1,2,3,4,6} Federal University of Alfenas, Alfenas, Minas Gerais, Brasil.

⁵ University Wenceslau Braz, Itajubá, Minas Gerais, Brasil.

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CORRESPONDING AUTHOR: Yasmim Ribeiro Fracaroli

E-mail: yasmimfracaroli@gmail.com

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DESCRIPTORES: Enfermagem; Prática avançada de enfermagem; Terminologia padronizada em enfermagem; Processo de enfermagem; Atenção à saúde.

ABSTRACT

Objective: to analyze the actions with potential for Advanced Practice Nursing according to the knowledge, education and use of the nursing process by nurses in southern Minas Gerais. **Methods:** this was an analytical, cross-sectional study with a quantitative approach and a non-probabilistic sample. **Results:** of the 140 participants, 48% reported having little or no knowledge, 36% intermediate knowledge, and 15% moderate or high knowledge. The majority (83.5%) reported performing advanced practice activities; the most frequent in the care domain was wound assessment and dressing prescription (65.71%); in the management/education domain it was participation in meetings to develop and implement risk and damage prevention protocols (50%). **Final considerations:** the actions related to the care domain and management/education domain reported by participants have the potential to be described as advanced practice, despite the level of knowledge that the sample demonstrated about this type of practice.

DESCRIPTORS: Nursing; Advanced practice nursing; Standardized nursing terminology; Nursing process; Health care.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: analizar las acciones con potencial para la Enfermería de Práctica Avanzada según el conocimiento, la formación y el uso del proceso de enfermería por parte de los enfermeros del sur de Minas Gerais. **Método:** estudio analítico, transversal, con enfoque cuantitativo y muestra no probabilística. **Resultados:** de los 140 participantes, 48% refirió tener poco o ningún conocimiento, 36% intermedio y 15% moderado o alto. La mayoría (83.5%) relató realizar actividades de prácticas avanzadas; la más frecuente del dominio del cuidado fue la evaluación de heridas y la prescripción de curaciones (65,71%); en el dominio gestión/educación fue la participación en reuniones para la elaboración e implantación de protocolos de prevención de riesgos y daños (50%). **Consideraciones finales:** las acciones relacionadas con el dominio del cuidado y el dominio de gestión/educaciones relatadas por los participantes tienen potencial para ser descritas como de práctica avanzada, a pesar del nivel de conocimiento.

DESCRIPTORES: Enfermería; Práctica avanzada de enfermería; Terminología estándar en enfermería; Proceso de enfermería; Atención de la salud.

INTRODUCTION

The conceptual definition of Advanced Practice Nursing (APN) is challenging, due to the wide variety of practices that this terminology encompasses and its constant expansion. It is common for different definitions to be adapted to each context, since each country is at a different stage in the implementation of APN and has different regulations regarding professional practice.¹ In this study, the concept presented by the International Council of Nurses (ICN) was adopted, in which advanced practice nurses are those who have acquired a specialized knowledge base, have the ability to make complex decisions, and possess clinical skills and competencies for expanded practice, whose characteristics are shaped by their context and country of origin accredited to practice.²

The literature points out that encouraging research into APN is a crucial point to be developed, considering increasing the production of knowledge in Nursing, which will contribute

to establishing these practices in health services, as it provides elements for consolidating the profession as a science.³ It should also be noted that there is a scarcity of national scientific productions on the subject.⁴

In 2014, the Executive Committee of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) proposed a Strategic Plan for Universal Health Coverage, focusing on the quality of services, by encouraging the Ministries of Health (MOH) of Latin American countries to train human resources trained to work in Primary Health Care (PHC), introducing new profiles of professionals and technicians, as well as strengthening existing ones, consolidating multidisciplinary and collaborative teams.⁵

In Brazil, the Federal Nursing Council (COFEN), in partnership with PAHO, has been promoting discussions related to APN with a view to its implementation within PHC. These discussions are based on the Canadian and American models and aim to increase the scope of nursing practice and its resoluteness, expanding access and health coverage

for the population.⁶ COFEN Technical Note No. 001/2023 emphasizes that, for implementation in Brazil, the Council is in line with the advanced clinical activities considered by the ICN guidelines.⁷ In addition, PHC represents the priority level of health care at which users enter the public system, connect with the other levels of care and allow the population to be brought closer together, thus playing a fundamental role in guaranteeing access, effectiveness and resoluteness of the care provided.⁸

In the state of Minas Gerais, as throughout Brazil, professionals are looking for new practices to increase access to quality healthcare. The Regional Nursing Council of Minas Gerais (COREN-MG) has been working to create care protocols to strengthen these advanced practices.

In view of these considerations, it is worth investigating whether Brazil has other favorable conditions for developing the role of APN, given that, as described above, there are foundations for regulating the practice, especially Law 7498/1986, which regulates the practice of nursing, and Ordinance 2.488, of October 21, 2011, which approves the National Primary Care Policy (PNAB).⁹⁻¹¹

In this search, it is of the utmost importance to map these practices, seeking to understand how this process of acquiring competencies is carried out in the training of nurses to make assertive decisions when intervening and obtaining sensitive results for the individual, the family and the community, through the documented Nursing Process (NP). Standardized terminologies are essential for the NP, as they enrich nurses' knowledge and improve communication and the quality of care provided.¹²⁻¹³

Furthermore, in order to advance nursing practice, it is necessary to strengthen professional updating and continuing education, with the aim of developing new skills and preparing professionals for emerging public health challenges.¹⁴

It also incorporates the complexity of the patient, the user of the health system, who is affected, making it possible to highlight the focus of APN and give nursing its identity as a relevant social practice, with specific knowledge. To this end, the aim of this study was to analyze the actions with potential for Advanced Practice Nursing according to the knowledge, training and use of the nursing process by nurses in the south of Minas Gerais.

METHOD

This is a quantitative, analytical and cross-sectional study, conducted in accordance with the STROBE recommendation for cross-sectional research.¹⁵ The population was made up

of nurses working in the south of Minas Gerais. According to information from the Regional Health Superintendencies, there are 7,360 registered nurses in the cities of southern Minas Gerais. The sample was a non-probabilistic convenience sample of 140 nurses.

Participants were recruited using the snowball sampling technique.¹⁶ Each participant used their personal connection in nursing groups on social networks (Whatsapp, Telegram, Instagram and Facebook) to recruit other people with similar characteristics. The inclusion criteria were: nurses linked to health services located in the south of Minas Gerais at any level of care; aged over 18, regardless of gender; who had some digital equipment with internet access. The exclusion criterion was the need to complete all the items in the questionnaire.

The research questionnaire was developed by the authors after a scoping review that explored national scientific production related to the activities of nurses in Advanced Practice Nursing (APN).¹⁷ It also incorporated the 22 characteristics defined in the International Council of Nurses (ICN) Guidelines for advanced practice nurses, which fall into three domains: Educational Preparation, Nature of Practice, and Regulatory Mechanisms, including country-specific professional regulations and policies that support the practice of advanced practice nurses.¹⁸ It also addressed, linked to the domains of the international guidelines, the following profissiological characteristics: sociodemographic characterization, professional characteristics, use of the Nursing Process (NP) and Standardized Language Systems (SLP), and level of knowledge about APN in relation to the level of training required and activities that make up the domains of care and management/education of advanced practice.

The instrument underwent a face and content evaluation by five research nurses experienced in nursing care and teaching. They were invited to assess the instrument for clarity, importance and appropriateness of each of the items, as well as make suggestions as to the removal, insertion or rewriting of the items that made up the questionnaire. The questionnaire was digitized using Google Forms, and the invitation to participate was sent to nurses via messaging apps. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, with formal consent obtained electronically.

The data collected was organized and categorized in an electronic spreadsheet and double typed to avoid transcription errors. The Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) software version 26.0 was used for descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. In order to verify the existence of an association between the dependent variables and the independent variables, non-parametric tests were used,

such as Pearson's Chi-square and Spearman's correlation. In this study, a 5% significance level was adopted, i.e. the data was statistically significant at $P < 0.05$. Once the analysis was complete, the data obtained was represented in tables, with absolute and percentage values, and inferential statistics were applied. The dependent variable was the nurses' level of knowledge of APS. For the analysis of the open questions, the results were interpreted descriptively.

The study complied with Resolution 466/2012 of the National Health Council and was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Alfenas, CAAE: 53199821.0.0000.5142, opinion N° 5.184.697.

RESULTS

Of the 140 participants, 126 (90%) were female, aged between 23 and 66, with the highest age range being 34-44, 68 (48.57%) years old, of white ethnicity, 104 (74.28%) and married, 76 (54.28%). Also, 71 (50.71%) had some specialization, with Family Health being the most mentioned, 26 (18.57%). The majority, 61 (44.58%), had more experience in hospital/specialized care. With regard to professional updating, 115 (82.14%) of the participants reported having

taken courses, especially Immunization, Health Management and Wound Care.

The study mapped nurses' knowledge of APS, with 90 (64.29%) claiming to have some knowledge. When assessing the level of knowledge (on a 5-point scale from no knowledge to high knowledge), 68 (48.57%) reported having little or no knowledge, 51 (36.43%) intermediate and 21 (15%) moderate or high.

As for the level of training needed to practice APN, 56 (40%) of the nurses said they believed that a degree would be sufficient and 12 (8.57%) mentioned a medium level of training. The others considered different postgraduate courses.

As for the activities associated with advanced practice nurses, 37 (26.43%) did not know how to answer, and among those who did, the most mentioned activities were: requesting tests 14 (10%), prescribing medication 13 (9.29%), making complex decisions 12 (8.57%), and nursing consultations 10 (7.14%).

As shown in Table 1, the questionnaire presented nursing actions divided into care and management/education, considered as EPA by the literature and/or the ICN. The majority, 92 (65.71%) of the nurses, reported assessing wounds and prescribing dressings, along with referring the patient to other services or professionals, 80 (57.14%).

Table 1 - Activities carried out by participants in the care domain. Alfenas, MG, Brazil, 2023

Activity	Professionals	%
Evaluates wounds and prescribes dressings for treatment	92	65,71
Refer the patient to another service or another professional	80	57,14
Performs debridements	67	47,86
Prescribes or performs non-pharmacological management (e.g. for pain relief)	56	40,00
Requests tests	52	37,14
Evaluates peripheral neuropathies	41	29,29
Performs chronic disease risk stratification	33	23,57
Makes use of technology to facilitate user care (e.g. telemedicine, teleconsultation)	30	21,43
Prescribes medication	21	15,00

Activity	Professionals	%
Performs highly complex nursing procedures (e.g. infusion of bone marrow, umbilical cord and hematopoietic precursors from peripheral blood; ultrasound)	15	10,71
None of the above	23	16,43
Total	554*	

Source: Author (2023).

Note: It should be noted that the number of responses is not consistent with the research sample (n=140), since some participants ticked more than one activity.

In the area of management/education, the most prominent activity was the participation of nurses in meetings to draw up and implement protocols to prevent risks and damage 70 (50%), followed by acting as a training agent for human resources

through continuing education 62 (44.29%), selecting materials and equipment for their clinical practice 57 (40.71%) and establishing indicators of the results of their nursing practice 51 (36.43%), among other activities shown in Table 2.

Table 2 - Activities carried out by participants in the management/education domain. Alfenas, MG, Brazil, 2023

Activity	Professionals	%
Participates in meetings to draw up and implement risk and injury prevention protocols	70	50,00
Is a training agent for human resources (continuing education)	62	44,29
Chooses materials and equipment for their clinical practice	57	40,71
Establishes indicators for the results of their nursing practice	51	36,43
Participates in the development of educational materials appropriate to the age and cognitive capacity of patients and family members/ caregivers (e.g. institutional manuals and toys)	49	35,00
Controls costs	35	25,00
Audits	31	22,14
Develops specific human resources training plans (participation in strategic planning, hiring)	29	20,71
Provides consultancy (specialized guidance)	27	19,29
None of the above	23	16,43
Total	470*	

Source: Author (2023).

Note: It should be noted that the number of responses is not consistent with the research sample (n=140), since some participants ticked more than one activity.

Pearson's chi-square test showed a statistical relationship between the length of time working in PHC and the level of knowledge reported about the APS ($p = 0.035$); and between the use of any SLP and knowledge reported about the APS ($p = 0.004$).

Spearman's correlation test revealed direct and inverse relationships with the level of knowledge about the EPA.

Spearman's correlation coefficients (r) were as follows: longer experience as a teacher/researcher ($r = 0.262$); participation in refresher courses ($r = 0.275$); use of SLP ($r = 0.196$); evaluation of nursing results ($r = 0.396$); longer experience as a care nurse ($r = -0.281$); and longer experience in PHC ($r = -0.179$). These results are shown in Tables 3 and 4 below.

Table 3 - Spearman's correlation coefficient (r) values and p -values for the independent variables: longest time working as a teacher/researcher, longest time working as a care nurse, longest time working in PHC, participation in refresher courses, evaluation of nursing results, academic preparation for the application of EP and use of SLP; and the level of knowledge reported about APS. Alfenas, MG, Brazil, 2023

Variables	Values	Level of knowledge in Advanced Practice Nursing
Longest time working as a teacher/researcher	r	0,262
	p	0,002
Longest time working as a care nurse	r	-0,281
	p	0,001
Longer time working in PHC	r	-0,179
	p	0,034
Participation in refresher courses	r	0,275
	p	0,001
Evaluation of nursing results	r	0,396
	p	0,000
Academic preparation for the application of the Nursing Process	r	0,179
	p	0,034
Use of a Standardized Language System	r	0,196
	p	0,021

Source: Author (2023).

Table 4 - Univariate analysis of the level of knowledge about APS according to the variables: Area of longest time working in PHC, Evaluation of Nursing results and Use of SLP. Alfenas, MG, Brazil, 2023

Variables	No	Yes	p-value
Area of longest experience in PHC			
No	40	49	0,035*
Yes	33	18	
Evaluation of nursing results			
No	43	13	0,000*

Variables	No	Yes	p-value
Yes			
Use of a	30	54	
Standardized Language System	24	10	
No	46	57	0,004*
Yes			

Source: Author (2023).

*Pearson's Chi-square test.

DISCUSSION

The study involved 140 nurses in the south of Minas Gerais and the Family Health specialization was the most common among the postgraduate courses completed. This is noteworthy given the initiatives that seek to promote the adoption of APN in Brazil. In 2018 and 2022, PAHO/WHO emphasized the importance of expanding nurses' responsibilities in PHC to promote universal access and clinical guidelines, especially in PHC, in the Latin American and Caribbean regions.^{19,20}

However, 61 (44.58%) nurses have a longer experience in hospital/specialized care. This situation is partly due to the demands of the job market, which prioritizes hiring professionals for hospital care. Nurse training often focuses on the hospital-centered model.²¹ The majority, 115 (82.14%) have taken courses in the last five years, vital to keep up with changes in public health, including technology, epidemiology and new diseases.²²

In the context of APN, the nurses listed the activities they consider typical of this professional category, with emphasis on: requesting tests; prescribing medication; complex decision-making; nursing consultations; more complex procedures; among others. However, 37 (26.43%) did not know how to answer the question, a finding corroborated by Parada et al.²³ who highlight nurses' lack of clarity regarding the scope of practice of APN professionals as a barrier to implementation in Brazil. Among the actions considered to be advanced practice by the participants were the collection of tests, delivery evolution, reception, risk classification, home visits and others. Some of the activities mentioned are considered to be exclusive to nurses and are carried out on a daily basis by these professionals. In other words, some of the respondents are unclear about APN actions, or the activities that are already considered to be exclusive to nurses.

Although 51 (43%) of the nurses claim to have above-average knowledge of APN, the answers to the questions raise doubts about this knowledge. APN activities, such as prescribing

treatments and differential diagnoses, are fundamental and require specialization. COFEN Technical Note No. 001/20237 is in line with the ICN guidelines,²⁴ emphasizing the need for advanced clinical activities. Therefore, there is a gap between declared knowledge and actual understanding of the EPA's duties, highlighting challenges in its implementation in Brazil.

In order to identify activities with potential for APN in the south of Minas Gerais, the majority, 92 (65.71%) reported carrying out wound assessment, prescribing dressings and referring patients to other professionals. These activities are central to advanced practice, with 80 (57.14%) mentioning referral. This suggests that many nurses already carry out actions in line with APN, highlighting the importance of recognizing and promoting them.

Furthermore, improving comprehensive care, for example in the area of wounds, requires an innovative approach to mobilizing health professionals and care models. Advanced practice nurses with a specialization in wound care stand out as the preferred option for filling gaps in services and offering evidence-based wound care.²⁵

In the area of management/education, 70 (50%) of the nurses highlighted their participation in meetings to create risk and harm prevention protocols. In addition, 62 (44.29%) play a role in training human resources through continuing education. This highlights the involvement of these professionals in management and educational activities, contributing to the improvement of nursing care and teaching. In addition, 51 (36.43%) of the nurses highlighted the importance of establishing indicators to evaluate the results of their nursing practice. This initiative is fundamental for monitoring care actions and basing best practices on evidence.²⁶

The study's findings highlight several significant relationships between the variables examined, providing valuable information on the interaction between training, professional experience and APN practice. An inversely proportional relationship between length of time working

in PHC and knowledge of APN suggests that nurses who have been working in this setting for longer may lose touch with advanced practices due to professional inertia and lack of training opportunities or even distance from the direct activity of care, which seem to be the most closely related to APN. Resistance to change and specialization in PHC can also contribute to this relationship.

A survey conducted in 2020 in a municipality in Rio Grande do Sul revealed that 84 (60.6%) of the professionals working in PHC had not received specific training to deal with families. This scenario raises questions about the relevance of encouraging specialized training and the implementation of continuous training programs by municipal authorities.²⁷ This highlights the importance of continuous professional development for all nurses, ensuring learning opportunities regardless of experience or area of practice.

On the other hand, the study found a direct relationship between knowledge of the APS and the evaluation of the results of care actions, highlighting the importance of well-informed professionals to improve the quality of care. In addition, the use of SLPs showed a positive correlation with knowledge of APN, highlighting the importance of effective clinical documentation and continuing education.

The research also revealed that nurses with experience as teachers and researchers tend to have greater knowledge of APN, while those with more time working as care nurses, especially in PHC, may face challenges in understanding and practicing APN. This suggests that discussions about APN may still be in the domain of training institutions.

Participation in refresher courses, evaluation of results and use of SLPs are associated with knowledge of APN and preparation to implement EP. This evidence emphasizes the complex relationship between training, experience and practice of APN in Nursing and underlines the importance of continuing education and the use of SLPs in PHC. In addition, they highlight the need for a clear understanding of EPA on the part of health professionals, patients and political representatives in order to advance its implementation.²⁸ Therefore, promoting effective and up-to-date nursing practice requires a balance between practical experience and continuing education.

The impact of the study is of great relevance both to the field of nursing and to the formulation of public health policies. The results showed that APN is a concept that is not widely disseminated among nurses in the southern region of Minas Gerais. This limitation on the understanding of the role played by advanced practice nurses highlights the urgent

need to raise awareness of the capabilities and competencies of these professionals.

The study has some limitations, including non-probabilistic sampling, self-perception bias, regional specificity and lack of dissemination of the APN concept. Therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution, highlighting the need for future comprehensive studies for a more complete understanding of APS in different contexts.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study achieved its objective of analyzing the actions with potential for Advanced Practice Nursing according to the knowledge, training and use of the nursing process by nurses in the south of Minas Gerais.

Almost half of the participants reported having little or no knowledge of APN, although 83.5% reported carrying out APN activities. To this end, a questionnaire was used, highlighting a list of actions based on the ICN guidelines, which allowed the participants to explain their activities, even though many considered them to be common actions in professional practice.

The APS actions most frequently reported by the participants were related to the care domain, such as assessing wounds, prescribing dressings and referring patients. In the management/education domain, participation in meetings to draw up and implement risk and harm prevention protocols stood out. These actions can serve as starting points for reflection on the development of APN in the region.

It is also worth considering the correlations, both positive and negative, between knowledge of APN and the training and occupation of the nurses taking part in this study, as well as the use of the nursing process. It is important to consider the challenge of qualifying in areas already provided for in the guidelines and resolutions that govern nursing care, in addition to those that characterize APN.

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