

RESEARCH

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SEXUALITY AND SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS: ANALYSIS OF HEALTH STUDENT TRAINING

Sexualidade e infecções sexualmente transmissíveis: análise da formação de alunos da área da saúde

Sexualidad e infecciones sexualmente transmitidas: análisis de la formación de estudiantes de salud

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To know the education of health students regarding sexuality and sexually transmitted infections. **Method:** Descriptive-analytical and cross-sectional study, developed with 108 students enrolled in the Nursing, Physiotherapy and Medicine courses of a public University. Data collection took place between January and March 2019 through the self-application of a questionnaire and data analysis using descriptive and inferential statistics. **Results:** Contact with the theme during the training occurred predominantly from specific disciplines. 82 students (75.93%) believe that the information on the subject provided in the undergraduate program is sufficient. 42 students (38.90%) suggested approaching the theme in regular or specific subjects. **Conclusion:** Knowing the aspects of the education of health students regarding sexuality and sexually transmitted infections, allows the development of curriculum revision strategies, in order to promote a competent performance on the subject.

Descriptors: Sex Education Curriculum, Sexuality, Sexually Transmitted Diseases, Students.

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RESUMO

Objetivo: Conhecer a formação de alunos da área da saúde quanto à sexualidade e Infecções Sexualmente Transmissíveis. **Método:** estudo descritivo-analítico e transversal, desenvolvido com 108 alunos matriculados nos cursos de Enfermagem, Fisioterapia e Medicina de uma Universidade pública. A coleta de dados ocorreu entre janeiro e março de 2019 por meio da autoaplicação de um questionário e na análise dos dados, utilizou-se a estatística descritiva e inferencial. **Resultados:** o contato com a temática durante a formação ocorreu predominantemente a partir de disciplinas específicas. 82 alunos (75,93%) acreditam que as informações acerca do tema fornecidas na graduação são suficientes. 42 alunos (38,90%) sugeriram abordar o tema em disciplinas regulares ou específicas. **Conclusão:** conhecer os aspectos da formação de alunos da área da saúde quanto à sexualidade e Infecções Sexualmente Transmissíveis, permite o desenvolvimento de estratégias de revisão dos currículos, a fim de promover uma competente atuação frente ao tema.

Descritores: Educação sexual, Currículo, Sexualidade, Doenças sexualmente transmissíveis, Estudantes.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Conocer la educación de los estudiantes de salud sobre sexualidad e infecciones de transmisión sexual. **Método:** estudio descriptivo-analítico y transversal, desarrollado con 108 estudiantes matriculados en cursos de Enfermería, Fisioterapia y Medicina de una universidad pública. La recopilación de datos tuvo lugar entre enero y marzo de 2019 mediante la autoaplicación de un cuestionario y el análisis de datos utilizando estadísticas descriptivas e inferenciales. **Resultados:** el contacto con el tema durante la capacitación se produjo principalmente de disciplinas específicas. 82 estudiantes (75,93%) creen que la información sobre el tema proporcionada en el programa de pregrado es suficiente. 42 estudiantes (38,90%) sugirieron abordar el tema en materias regulares o específicas. **Conclusión:** conocer los aspectos de la educación de los estudiantes de salud con respecto a la sexualidad y las infecciones de transmisión sexual, permite el desarrollo de estrategias de revisión curricular, con el fin de promover un desempeño competente en el tema.

Descriptor: Educación sexual, Currículum, Sexualidad, Enfermedades de transmisión sexual, Estudiantes.

INTRODUCTION

The process of university education in the health area regarding sexuality and STI/AIDS has been widely debated, with the purpose of modifying the profile of future professionals, aiming at improving the population's health care. This is based on the need for the student to have a healthy sexuality based on safe practices, so that he can exercise sexual education in society.¹

However, the understanding of sexuality with genitality and reductionism is still present among undergraduate health students, which demonstrates a gap in education, in addition to the predominance of mostly biologist conceptions. Thus, because it is a very controversial subject and permeated by prejudice and taboos, health professionals have difficulty in addressing it.²

When this subject is not fully and adequately debated in academic education, impacts on future professional practice are generated,^{1,3} which may lead to insufficient

sexual information from society and, consequently, unnecessary public health expenses.¹

Given the context presented and considering that it is health professionals who are directly linked to the sexual education of the population⁴⁻⁶, this study is justified by the importance of exploring the formation process of undergraduate health students, in order to contribute to the expansion of discussions and actions on the subject. It also offers subsidies for the restructuring or inclusion of contents in the undergraduate curriculum, enabling the formation of a professional capable of dealing more safely and efficiently with the issues related to the subject.

Therefore, considering the university as forming professionals who should act in health promotion disease prevention, this study aimed to know the education of health students regarding sexuality and sexually transmitted infections.

METHODS

This is a descriptive-analytical cross-sectional study, conducted at a Federal Public University of the South of Minas Gerais State. Data collection took place from January to March 2019.

108 students regularly enrolled in the 9th period of the Nursing, Physiotherapy and Medicine courses participated in this research. This public is justified by being inherent in the health area, a group of professionals who will possibly develop activities related to the theme sexually transmitted infections and sexuality. Inclusion criteria were: to be regularly enrolled in the 9th period of the Nursing, Physiotherapy or Medicine courses of the university in question and be present on the day of data collection. Exclusion criteria were: being absent from the classroom at the time of data collection and being on sick or maternity leave.

Data collection was performed by the researcher herself in classrooms, after previous contact with the teacher and scheduling of the day and time, without harming the development of the planned activities. Students were approached and invited to participate in the research and, after accepting the invitation, they received the Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF), containing information about the study, its objectives and procedures, as well as the ethical aspects applied to research with human beings, legislated by Resolution CNS 466/12.⁷ They then signed the FICF in two ways. The identities of the students were preserved as legislated in this resolution.

Data were collected through a questionnaire originating from a master's dissertation,⁸ with the permission of the author of the study to use it. The instrument consisted of 13 semi-open and open questions, designed to evaluate sociodemographic data and aspects of the theme itself. It was completed by the student himself in approximately 15 minutes and then returned to the researcher.

The collected data were typed and retyped in the *Microsoft Excel*® spreadsheet, version 2013, to validate the data by double-typing. It is noteworthy that the information from open questions were quantified according to their similar categories.

With the tabulated data, descriptive and inferential statistical analysis were performed, by using *Software R*, version 3.5.3. In the descriptive analysis, means and standard deviations were calculated, and tables with absolute values and percentages were made. Pearson's chi-square and Fisher's exact tests were performed to evaluate the association between the variables of interest, considering a significance level of 5% ($p < 0.005$).

The research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (Comitê de Ética em Pesquisa – CEP) of the Federal University of Alfnas (Universidade Federal de Alfnas – UNIFAL/MG) on December 11, 2018, under the approval nº 3.071.335 (CAAE: 02576518.2.0000.5142), respecting the principles as determined by Resolution 466/2012. The coordinating teachers of these courses were requested to authorize the research conduct and the students' approach.

RESULTS

Regarding the characterization of the participants, of the 108 students who participated in this study, the most frequent age group was from 20 to 24 years old, denoting 65 (60.18%) students (average 24.65 years old and standard deviation 3, 48), 71 (71.30%) were female, 102 (94.44%) were single, 54 (49.99%) were living with friends and 59 (54.63%) were Catholic, as shown in **table 1**.

Table 1 - Characterization of students of the 9th period of Nursing, Physiotherapy and Medicine courses of a public University according to sociodemographic characteristics. Alfnas, MG, Brazil, 2019

Variables	Courses							
	Nursing		Physiotherapy		Medicine		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Age Range								
20-24 years old	16	14.81	21	19.44	28	25.93	65	60.18
25-29 years old	4	3.70	8	7.41	17	15.74	29	26.85
30+ years old	2	1.85	1	0.93	8	7.41	11	10.19
Did not answer	0	0.00	0	0.00	3	2.78	3	2.78
Gender								
Female	20	18.52	24	22.22	33	30.56	77	71.30
Male	2	1.85	6	5.56	23	21.29	31	28.70
Marital status								
Married	1	0.93	0	0.00	4	3.70	5	4.63
Separated	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	0.93	1	0.93
Single	21	19.44	30	27.78	51	47.22	102	94.44
Dwelling								
Friends	14	12.95	17	15.74	23	21.30	54	49.99
Parents	1	0.93	5	4.63	3	2.78	9	8.34
Alone	4	3.70	7	6.48	25	23.15	36	33.33
Other (companion and relatives)	3	2.78	1	0.93	5	4.63	9	8.34
Religion								
Catholic	12	11.11	17	15.74	30	27.78	59	54.63
Spiritualism	4	3.70	5	4.63	6	5.56	15	13.89
Evangelical	2	1.85	1	0.93	3	2.78	6	5.56
Protestant	2	1.85	2	1.85	3	2.78	7	6.48
Others (atheist, none and umbanda)	2	1.85	3	2.78	10	9.26	15	13.89
Did not answer	0	0.00	2	1.85	4	3.70	6	5.55

Regarding the disciplines in which the participating students had contact with the theme sexuality and STI/

AIDS, it was noted that 19 (10.27%) Nursing students mentioned the discipline Women's Health.

It is surprising to note that 12 (6.50%) students of the Physiotherapy course report that no discipline of the curriculum addressed the issue in question, noting that the subjects Embryology and Women's Health were the main responsible for the transmission of this content, although only five (2.70%) times each were mentioned.

The Medical Clinical discipline was the most cited for medical students as a transmitter of the theme, being mentioned by 32 (17.30%) students. In addition, it was observed that there was a statistically significant difference between the cited disciplines and the courses ($p < 0.0001$). It is noteworthy that the tabulation was performed according to the number of times the subject was cited, considering that the same student could mention more than one subject. Such distributions can be seen in **table 2**.

Table 2 – Distribution of health students' answers according to the disciplines that had contact with the theme sexuality and STI/AIDS in the undergraduate course. Alfnas, MG, Brazil, 2019

Disciplines	Course						Total	
	Nursing		Physiotherapy		Medicine		n	%
	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Primary Care	7	3.79	0	0.00	0	0.00	7	3.79
Anatomy	0	0.00	1	0.54	0	0.00	1	0.54
Anthropology	0	0.00	3	1.62	2	1.08	5	2.70
Biosafety	0	0.00	1	0.54	0	0.00	1	0.54
Medical Clinic	0	0.00	0	0.00	32	17.30	32	17.30
Functional Dermatology	0	0.00	1	0.54	0	0.00	1	0.54
Embryology	0	0.00	5	2.70	0	0.00	5	2.70
Epidemiology	0	0.00	1	0.54	1	0.54	2	1.08
Philosophy	0	0.00	1	0.54	0	0.00	1	0.54
Physiology	0	0.00	0	0.00	2	1.08	2	1.08
Gerontology	0	0.00	1	0.54	0	0.00	1	0.54
Gynecology and Obstetrics	0	0.00	0	0.00	28	15.15	28	15.15
Immunology	1	0.54	2	1.08	2	1.08	5	2.70
Family and Community Medicine	0	0.00	0	0.00	26	14.05	26	14.05
Microbiology	0	0.00	2	1.08	4	2.16	6	3.24
None	2	1.08	12	6.50	0	0.00	14	7.58
Neurology	0	0.00	1	0.54	0	0.00	1	0.54
Optional (Human Reproduction) Pathology	0	0.00	2	1.08	1	0.54	3	1.62
Pediatrics	0	0.00	2	1.08	4	2.16	6	3.24
Policies	0	0.00	0	0.00	2	1.08	2	1.08
Psychology	0	0.00	1	0.54	0	0.00	1	0.54
Children's Health	4	2.16	0	0.00	0	0.00	4	2.16
Collective Health	0	0.00	1	0.54	0	0.00	1	0.54
Women's Health	19	10.27	5	2.70	0	0.00	24	12.97
Sociology	0	0.00	1	0.54	0	0.00	1	0.54
All	0	0.00	1	0.54	3	1.62	4	2.16
Total*	33	17.84	45	24.32	107	57.84	185	100.00

p-value <0.0001 comparing courses

It was noted that 82 (75.93%) academics participating in this study believe that information about sexuality and sexually transmitted infections provided at undergraduate level is sufficient for the development of post-college work. However, a significant number of students, totaling 26 (24.07%) consider that the knowledge provided is not sufficient.

There is also a contrast to the students of Physiotherapy regarding this contribution, since 17 (15.74%) students of the course stated that the undergraduate does not offer

sufficient content. There was an association between the course variables and the belief that information about sexuality and sexually transmitted infections provided at undergraduate level is sufficient to develop guidance after college ($p < 0.0001$).

Considering the variable best way to learn about sexuality and STI/AIDS during graduation, the suggestions pointed out by the students participating in the study were arranged in similar categories, according to the following:

- Traditional methodologies: lectures, seminars and pamphlet distribution;
- Active methodologies: dynamics, games, debates and yarnning circles;
- Regular or specific subject: theoretical class, tests, papers, case studies and specific subject in the curriculum.
- Empowering the approach: to deepen how to talk with the patient, to approach the subject clearly and to approach the theme from the updated reference of the Ministry of Health and the World Health Organization.
- Practice and internship field: practices, case studies, field practices, internship and practices in reference centers.

It was observed that the main suggestion of the participating academics about the best way to learn about the subject, pointed out by 42 (38.90%) students, consisted of addressing regular or specific discipline. Although there was no statistically significant association between the courses and the best way to learn about the subject ($p = 0.232$), it was found that in the Nursing and Medical courses there were more students who mentioned active methodologies over traditional ones, contrary to what was observed in the Physiotherapy course, as shown in table 3.

Table 3 - Distribution of health students' answers according to the variables "sufficient supply of information by undergraduate course for professional performance" and "best way to learn about the subject in undergraduate course". Alfenas, MG, Brazil, 2017

Variables	Course						Total	
	Nursing		Physiotherap y		Medicine		n	%
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Sufficient supply of information by undergraduate professional performance								
Yes	18	16.68	13	12.03	51	47.27	82	75.93
No	4	3.70	17	15.74	5	4.63	26	24.07
Subtotal	22	20.38	30	27.77	56	51.85	108	100.00
Best way to learn about the topic during undergraduate								
Traditional Methodologies	2	1.85	9	8.33	8	7.41	19	17.59
Active Methodologies	6	5.56	2	1.85	9	8.33	17	15.74
Capabilities for the approach	2	1.85	2	1.85	4	3.70	8	7.40
Approach regular or specific discipline	8	7.41	11	10.19	23	21.30	42	38.90
Curricular Practices and Internships	1	0.93	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	0.93
No more content required	2	1.85	2	1.85	2	1.85	6	5.55
Did not answer	1	0.93	4	3.70	10	9.26	15	13.89
Subtotal	22	20.38	30	27.77	56	51.85	108	100.00

p-value <0.0001 comparing the courses and the belief as to whether the information about sexuality and STI/AIDS provided by the undergraduate degree is sufficient for professional performance.
p-value=0.232 comparing courses and the best way to learn about the subject in undergraduate

DISCUSSION

In this study, there was a higher frequency of the age group between 20 and 24 years old (60.18%) and average age of 24.65 years, which corroborates previous researches data.⁹ However, it is verified in national and international analyzes that investigate the theme, age and average age lower than the ones found in this study.¹⁰⁻¹⁴ Regarding the characterization of the population, there was a predominance of female students (71.30%), which is reaffirmed in other national and international studies conducted with health students.^{11,12}

The Brazilian previous researches on the subject corroborates the predominance of the Catholic religion (54.63%), as well as the single marital status (94.44%) found in this analysis.^{2,14} Regarding the dwelling, it was found that 49.99% of students lived with friends, in contrast to a qualitative study conducted in the south of the country with university students, which found that most students (75.00%) lived with parents or family members,² which may be related to the locoregional characteristics that influence students' admission dynamics to the university.

Regarding which disciplines health students had contact with the theme sexuality and STI/AIDS, it was realized the importance of specific disciplines in the training on the subject. Nevertheless, although several disciplines (25 in total) have been cited for this approach, in none of the courses there is an exclusive discipline for the theme. Therefore, it can be inferred that there is no adequate workload intended to address a complex and information-subdivided subject.

In addition, 14 students argued that the subject was not addressed in any discipline, proving that the subject is not sufficiently addressed to provide satisfactory knowledge that, in fact, effectively reaches all students.

It was also evidenced in this study that 82 (75.93%) of the students stated that the information about sexuality and STI/AIDS offered in the undergraduate program is sufficient for the development of the work after the end of college. This statement is not surprising, considering that for the researched courses more than one discipline has already included content about sexually transmitted infections and sexuality in its curriculum dynamics.

The perceived heterogeneity between the courses regarding the self-assessment regarding the contribution of undergraduate students in relation to the subject is due to the fact that sex education in health courses is not standardized with regard to teaching content. Therefore, it is necessary to review the educational curricula about sexuality and sexually transmitted infections.

In a qualitative study conducted in the state of Paraná with undergraduate Nursing students from a public university, it was observed that the formation of students on the theme of human sexuality is fragile, being sometimes little addressed or even not exposed in undergraduate studies.²

It is observed that in health courses there are still gaps pointed out by students regarding the approach to the experience of human sexuality in their curricula and that strategies are still needed to complement professional formation.

International studies express the relevance of including mandatory sexual health content in health education curricula rather than introducing them as optional. Thus, the importance of the theme as a component of professional practice is emphasized, especially regarding professions in which the theme still constitutes a new field of knowledge, such as physiotherapy.¹⁵

Although in the present work the active methodologies of knowledge transmission have been little mentioned by the students (15.74%), other studies have demonstrated their effects on health education, aiming to promote changes in the education of students and health professionals in the context of sexuality and STI/AIDS prevention. Authors claim that this type of intervention was able to go beyond a simple transmission of content, allowing the exchange of ideas and knowledge and causing positive impacts on the adoption of conscious attitudes and academic education.¹

In addition, the dissemination of content in isolation is not capable of triggering attitudinal changes, whereas active methods of knowledge transmission that incorporate aspects related to the morals, beliefs, culture, prejudices and life histories of those involved in health education activities are more effective.¹

It is noteworthy that the small inclusion of this type of methodology in the suggestions of the students of this research may be associated with usual issues, such as the predominant use of traditional methodologies, which focus on the transmission of knowledge and not always its own construction in a problematized way.

A course developed with Medicine students from universities in the northeastern region of the country that employed active teaching methodologies on sexuality also attested to positive impacts on the education of students in this course. Films, videos, debates, presentations and discussions of clinical cases based on true situations were incorporated into the curriculum dynamics in order to simulate clinical care. In practice, it was observed that students expressed less embarrassment and greater willingness to listen to client/patient complaints, as well as greater problem-solving skills compared to students who did not receive this formation.¹¹

In an analysis that discussed the extensionist experience about health education and sexuality of nursing students at a public university in Minas Gerais, it is noted that the contact of the student with this type of experience contributes to the qualification of the health professional education, especially with regard to the performance in Primary Health Care. In addition, this experience not only enables health promotion activities, but also contributes to increasing safety and reducing shyness when working with

the subject.¹⁶

However, although extension activities represent an important means of addressing sexual health in health courses, attention should be paid to their optional nature, which may limit participation, as it may arouse interest only in students who have previously identified with the topic, and are not sufficient to fill the gaps in the curriculum of health student education.¹¹

Yet, despite the limitations that expository approaches, such as lectures, represent in sex education for health undergraduates, they are nonetheless important tools for the dissemination of knowledge about the physiology and anatomy of the human sexual response, especially when one intends to work with large groups. Moreover, this medium can be used to convey information on more subjective or controversial topics, provided they have different perspectives.¹⁷

As limitations of the study, it is pointed out that the results found in this analysis cannot be generalized to all undergraduate health students, since only three courses were included in the local study.

CONCLUSION

The results of the present study show that the proposed objective was achieved and pointed gaps and essential aspects that still need to be included in the formation process. Although several disciplines have been mentioned regarding the approach of the theme in the curriculum dynamics, it is still necessary to pay attention to its effective insertion in the curriculum of health students' formation, in order to provide future quality assistance to society.

The identification of aspects related to training regarding the approach to sexuality and sexually transmitted infections allows college managers to know the gaps in the approach to the theme present in the undergraduate, offering grants to refine and restructure the curriculum model or incorporate teaching methodologies into undergraduate health courses.

Besides, it is noteworthy that the institution of measures to provide a broader and more efficient training on the subject provides a satisfactory knowledge for the academics themselves, which will culminate in a qualified assistance on the subject to society in the future professional performance of these students. Therefore, further studies are suggested to test the effectiveness of the sex education methods used in undergraduate courses.

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