Experience Report

## OPERATIVE GROUP WITH NURSING STUDENTS: EXPERIENCE IN AN ONCOLOGY ACADEMIC LEAGUE

# GRUPO OPERATIVO COM ESTUDANTES DE ENFERMAGEM: VIVÊNCIA EM UMA LIGA ACADÊMICA DE ONCOLOGIA

GRUPO OPERATIVO CON ESTUDIANTES DE ENFERMERÍA: EXPERIENCIA EN UNA LIGA ACADÉMICA DE ONCOLOGÍA

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Objective: to describe a group activity developed in an Academic League for Cancer Prevention. Method: an experience report on an operative group held in the first half of 2019, at a public university in the countryside of São Paulo, with 27 students from the Nursing course aged between 17 and 25 years, attending between the first and seventh school terms. Results: in group discussions, four themes emerged, highlighting aspects of the context of illness from cancer, such as stigmas, fears, desires, fantasies, experiences of cancer as an aggressive and limiting disease for the affected and their families, in addition to coping resources, such as religion/spirituality. Conclusion: the group activity developed in an Academic League for Cancer Prevention revealed the importance of addressing oncology in Nursing graduation, enabling students to deal with situations of intervention and prepare themselves emotionally for the challenges that may emerge in this field in the future.

Descriptors: Education, Nursing. Health Education. Focus Groups. Medical Oncology. Psycho-Oncology.

Objetivo: descrever uma atividade grupal desenvolvida em uma Liga Acadêmica de Prevenção ao Câncer. Método: relato de experiência em um grupo operativo realizado no primeiro semestre de 2019, em uma universidade pública do interior de São Paulo, com 27 graduandos do curso de Enfermagem com idades entre 17 e 25 anos, cursando entre o primeiro e o sétimo períodos letivos. Resultados: nas discussões grupais emergiram quatro temas, evidenciando aspectos do contexto de adoecimento por câncer, como estigmas, medos, anseios, fantasias, vivências do câncer como uma doença agressiva e limitante para o acometido e sua família, além de recursos de enfrentamento, como a religiosidade/espiritualidade. Conclusão: a atividade grupal desenvolvida em uma Liga Acadêmica de Prevenção ao Câncer evidenciou a importância de a oncologia ser trabalhada na formação de Enfermagem, capacitando os estudantes para lidarem com situações de intervenção e prepararem-se emocionalmente para os desafios que podem emergir nesse campo de atuação futura.

Descritores: Educação em Enfermagem. Educação em Saúde. Grupos Focais. Oncologia. Psico-Oncologia.

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Objetivo: describir una actividad en grupo desarrollada en una Liga Académica para Prevención al Cáncer. Método: relato de experiencia de un grupo operativo celebrado en el primer semestre de 2019, en una universidad pública en el interior de São Paulo, con 27 estudiantes del curso de Enfermería con edades comprendidas entre los 17 y los 25 años, cursando entre el primer y el séptimo períodos lectivos. Resultados: en las discusiones en grupo, surgieron cuatro temas, destacando aspectos del contexto de enfermedad causada por el cáncer, tales como estigmas, miedos, deseos, fantasías, experiencias de cáncer como una enfermedad agresiva y limitante para los afectados y sus familias, además de recursos de afrontamiento, tales como la religión/espiritualidad. Conclusión: las actividades en grupo desarrolladas en una Liga Académica para Prevención al Cáncer mostró la importancia de trabajarse la oncología en la formación de Enfermería, permitiendo a los estudiantes lidiar con situaciones de intervención y prepararse emocionalmente para los desafíos que puedan surgir en este campo en el futuro.

Descriptores: Educación en Enfermería. Educación en Salud. Grupos Focales. Oncología Médica. Psicooncología.

#### Introduction

In the professional training in health areas, there has been a concern with the transmission of content and insertion into practical activities that allow for fully understanding the subjects, through teaching, research and extension actions. Among the strategies adopted by students for a more active participation in the training process and the possibility of practicing university extension activities that put them in direct contact with themes of interest, complementary to regular content, there are the Academic Leagues<sup>(1)</sup>. These are known as groups maintained and organized by graduate students with own statute and autonomy to perform activities and events, respecting the norms of educational units to which they are subjected, such as departments, teaching units and the university itself. In these spaces, students can organize actions that aim to expand knowledge in certain areas, increasing the repertoire offered in the curricula. In addition, they allow for students' engagement in training actions and also in contact with the community, notably in the healthcare area, including Nursing, as prioritized in this experience report.

Thus, the Academic Leagues integrate actions of three aspects of university education: teaching, research and extension. The latter is of interest in this experience report. The focus here will be on the activity developed by the League for Preventing and Fighting Cancer (LPFC) that has been operating since the year 1998 at a public institution located in the countryside of São Paulo.

Cancer has been emphasized in recent decades as a public health problem, nationally

and internationally, of great epidemiological relevance in relation to the incidence and morbidity and mortality. It must be considered as a theme in Nursing education, since this profession has great responsibilities with these patients and their families, in the care, diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation<sup>(2)</sup>. Currently, cancer has become a common and universal event, described in the scientific literature as a problem that affects people in different age groups and in different localities in the world<sup>(3-6)</sup>. In Brazil, from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the concerns regarding this illness intensified. This process turned into a remarkable presence in everyday life and a vigorous social concern<sup>(7)</sup>.

The care with people with cancer has advanced over the years due to new methods of early detection, screening of carcinogens and types of neoplasms, among other aspects<sup>(2)</sup>. The progress achieved in the development of new technologies, medicines and procedures resulted in a significant reduction in the number of deaths and improved care provision<sup>(8)</sup>.

Although the cure rates have increased in recent decades, the number of deaths from this disease or its complications is still alarming. According to data from the National Cancer Institute (INCA), only in the year 2015, 107,470 males and 90,228 females died from various types of neoplasms<sup>(9)</sup>. These data show the problem caused by this type of illness in the national context, requiring attention from health agencies.

At the international level, approximately one in every six deaths results from cancer. This

type of illness is the second leading cause of death in the world, being responsible, only in 2018, for about 9.6 million deaths. Among the number of deaths recorded, approximately 70% occurred in low- and middle-income countries which shows possible inequalities of access to adequate resources to treat the disease.

The problem cancer has currently assumed requires the constant development and improvement of public policies for prevention, as well as active and problem-solving actions for the treatment and monitoring of sick subjects, understanding them as bio-psycho-sociospiritual beings<sup>(11)</sup>. In this sense, in addition to the biological aspects, the process of illness by cancer is strongly marked by the psychosocial<sup>(12)</sup>, socioeconomic<sup>(13-15)</sup>, and cultural<sup>(16)</sup> aspects that deserve attention.

These aspects, in many situations, will contribute to the emergence of stigmas, fantasies, and fears in relation to the disease, the acceptance or refusal of treatment, as well as access to decent conditions of treatment. In this way, they will affect survival rates and quality of life of the sick, families, caregivers and healthcare team monitoring them. Thus, in the Nursing graduate course, it is important to show students the complexity of care with patients and family members in case of illness form cancer, once oncology is a field with a significant number of these professionals.

In this context, educational institutions should rethink their strategies and priorities for the academic training (in this case, not only for Nursing), especially in the oncology area. These professionals will provide assistance to a population in constant growth, with an increasingly longer life expectancy, seeking health services to meet the needs emerging in a panorama in which the incidence of cancer increases every year (1). In the promotion of the care provided by the nursing team, one of the complexities of the actions to be developed is based on the fact that these professionals have to pay attention to the biopsychosocial aspects that permeate the experiences of the sick and the people who accompany them.

These aspects are of essential observation in the treatment process, because the subjectivity of the sick and their relatives, in addition to cultural, economic and religious/spiritual aspects, will be present since the diagnosis until the end of the treatment. In this sense, the professionals should be attentive to these aspects, once creating positive relationships with cancer patients and their families, as well as addressing the emotional problems of patients in relation to their diseases (17), considering their opinions, personal beliefs and religion/spirituality, is essential for the satisfaction of the sick person and their family/caregivers in relation to the care received.

Concomitant to the care provided to patients and their family/caregivers, professionals should be attentive to their own care. They cannot forget they will have to deal with themes that are of difficult experience and development, which makes the development of this perception since graduation important.

The highlight for group activities in the graduate Nursing course aims to discuss how this active methodology may be employed in this scenario of interface between extension and education, enabling greater engagement of the student and allowing for expressions that are part of their professional training and construction of their future identity as a nurse.

Thus, the objective of this experience report is to describe a group activity developed in an Academic League for Preventing and Fighting Cancer.

#### Method

This is an experience report conducted in the first half of 2019 with students from a Nursing graduate course of a higher education institution in the countryside of São Paulo, invited to describe their academic and personal experiences with oncology. The participants were 27 students, being 24 females and 3 males, aged between 17 and 25 years and attending between the first and seventh school terms. A Nursing professor and the psychologist who coordinated the group activities were also present.

The group activity aimed to promote the participation of graduate students, as well as bring elements of identity that could be useful both in studies and in preparing for future nursing interventions in the oncology field. Thus, teaching-learning operative group was developed through the technique of reflection groups, based on the model of Pichon-Rivière (18), in a single meeting.

The operative groups constitute one of several instruments available for group interventions. The development of operative groups is based on the organization of a group of people with a common goal, who seek to address a theme and work as a team. In this process, the technique consists of analyzing implicit or latent aspects and aspects manifested by participants, making the unconscious aware. Group activity is based on the premise of transmuting stereotyped situations and dilemmas in dialectical situations that lead to learning (18). Learning should be considered a process of advances and setbacks in a constant dialectical movement. While you learn, ways of seeing the world or a reality are abandoned, acquiring another look over what is being discussed. This group modality is structured in a model focused on a task that is defined at the beginning of the activities and guides the group work.

The meeting took place in a classroom of the university, with the organization of a circle in which participants could see and hear. The duration was one hour and five minutes, and the group task was agreed between the participants, according to the request of the League, but directed in accordance with the contents that emerged from the group field, namely: personal and academic experiences which provided contact with people with cancer and about the knowledge on the subject before and after beginning the Nursing course.

The content was analyzed by listening to the material. Data organization was carried out by the survey of emerging themes from the group and were presented in sequential order as they appeared. The contents expressed were analyzed and discussed in the light of the scientific literature about illness from cancer.

#### **Results and Discussion**

Based on the discussions, four themes emerged as content of the dialogs, which will be presented below. To start the activities, students were encouraged to talk about what came to their mind when hearing word cancer. The goal was to enter the group task through a theme that would not bring the personal aspects related to the experiences of the disease so soon. This theme is known as not easy to be dealt with, due to the symbolic representations that are often associated with death.

First emerging theme: Personal perceptions on the word cancer

When talking about what they thought when hearing the word cancer, students described aspects related to the treatment of the disease, such as chemotherapy, biological aspects of illness and stigma coupled to the word cancer, synonym of imminent death, once the person dies either from cancer or from another process of illness resulting from cancer. In relation to mentioning the biological aspects of the disease, students addressing this matter is plausible, since, as they are attending a course in the health area, they are constantly challenged to understand the biological meanings of illness, in an often biomedical paradigm.

In relation to personal perceptions about cancer, one should consider that the representations that people develop on a topic are directly influenced by historical, social, cultural, political and economic aspects that will shape beliefs, values, attitudes, perceptions, emotions and subjectivity in general <sup>(19)</sup>. In this way, it is possible to understand that perceptions built by students participating in the group about the word cancer were related to the conception of the cancer as a complex disease and demarcated by negative meanings socially assigned to it.

Second emerging theme: Perceptions and knowledge about cancer before and after beginning university

In this topic, students reported that they having a poor knowledge about the disease before beginning the nursing course. What they knew derived from the popular (and often stigmatized) knowledge that cancer is an incurable disease, which affects the person and leads to death in little time. This aspect reported by the group in relation to the illness by cancer is linked to the social imaginary of cancer as a terminal disease, with no prospect of cure and loaded with suffering, linked to what they addressed in the first emerging theme.

These perceptions about the illness are not so mistaken. Cancer indeed constitutes a set of complex diseases, which require attention and care, with invasive procedures that cause pain, physically and psychologically affecting people and their families. It is an important public health problem not only in developing countries but also in developed countries<sup>(20)</sup>. However, there is more about it, because the advances in procedures adopted for treatment, added to new forms of offered care, currently allow for new perspectives in relation to the disease.

Therefore, the Nursing education must be attentive to the dynamics of care provided to cancer patients and their families. Activities such as those carried out by the League for Preventing and Fighting Cancer become fundamental complementary actions to enrich the repertoire of university education, preparing the student, somehow, to contexts and situations that they might face in the oncologic nursing.

Third emerging theme: Stigma in relation to cancer

The stigma in relation to cancer was another theme that emerged in the debates. Participants reported that stigma in relation to cancer led people not to talk about the subject. In situations in which the person is already sick, they may not reveal the illness, for fear of awakening a series of feelings and behaviors in other people when talking about the disease. There are also situations in which people do not mention cancer, once they believe that talking about this disease can attract it. In this way, one perceives the size of the meanings socially attributed to cancer and the impact on the people's lives, particularly in Nursing students.

Culturally, this aspect is rooted in society and influences and compromises the relations of the sick with family and social group surrounding them, once it leads to difficulty talking about the disease openly and frankly<sup>(21)</sup>. Cancer has been presented by the scientific literature as a process coupled to social perceptions<sup>(19)</sup>, of the sick person, family members and even of health professionals in relation to the disease.

Despite the evolution of technologies and forms of treatment, the stigma of cancer prints a mark on culture, full of negative representations that seem to not dissolve<sup>(19)</sup>. This aspect needs to be considered in the actions of the professionals providing care, since it interferes in prevention, diagnosis, adherence to treatment and treatment<sup>(22)</sup>, arousing various feelings, such as sadness, anger, anxiety, fear of death, among others.

Four emerging theme: Support to the person affected by cancer

About the support received by a person, the family was described as essential. Many times, the person who receives the news becomes helpless and the family, although suffering together, ends up supporting them. Transmitting security to the person is essential, despite the unknown future. The support offered ranges from practical issues, that the sick person needs to perform certain activities, to emotional support, which goes from the reception to support and encouragement. Therefore, the support network must provide two instances of aid to its patients: instrumental and emotional<sup>(23)</sup>. In relation to social support, the participants mentioned the importance religious/spiritual support, respecting, 6

however, the religious/spiritual orientation of each subject or even the fact that some could not follow any guidance.

The influence of cancer in family dynamics is marked by fears not only of the sick person but also of the people accompanying them. Considering that neoplasms have the possibility of relapse and the need for intervention, this phenomenon naturally ends up changing the family context, because it exposes people to greater vulnerability, loss of health and well-being, financial losses and physical, mental and emotional unbalance<sup>(20)</sup>.

The cancer impact should be observed, considering the impact on the life of the subject affected by the disease and the family dynamics, since everyone will be involved in the process. This has significant relevance in Nursing education, because it is important to warn students about the need for paying attention not only to the physical needs of patients and their families, but also to the subjective aspects that permeate the care. The Nursing, together with other members from the professional team, has an essential role to avoid the abandonment of treatment.

These emerging themes allow for recognizing the mobilizing dimension of the group with these students. Even though aspects related to academic knowledge about this theme are recovered and discussed, emotional elements centered on the students themselves could be brought and dimensioned in a training space built by students and coordinators of the activity. Thus, the group is recommended not only as initial invitation to approach cancer, but also as a perennial space for reflection on the way each student faces oncology along their routine in the Nursing graduation.

A limitation of this study is its single group activity that inserts it in a specific context, with its particularities, which must be considered. Furthermore, several participating students were freshmen and the meanings attributed to cancer should carefully be viewed, because they had not yet had practical and professional contact with the oncology area.

#### Conclusion

The experience of the group with Nursing students revealed aspects that are part of the context of illness from cancer, such as stigmas, fears, desires, fantasies, experiences marked by feelings of cancer as an aggressive and limiting disease for the sick person with repercussion in the family environment. These aspects demonstrate the importance of working the theme in the contexts of Nursing education, so that subjects acquire theoretical and technical repertoire to deal with situations of intervention in oncology, as well as are prepared psychologically for the challenges they may face in this field of work.

The group constituted a space in which students had the opportunity to present their academic and personal experiences about cancer, and was marked by a moment of tension and with periods of silence which expressed the difficulty to address the issue. During graduation, some themes addressed in subjects or the experiences in internship, research and extension can be intense for students, who are not always well prepared. Therefore, the existence of a space for reflection on and to verbalize about these experiences is relevant, in order to understand anxieties, fears and feelings experienced by them that can interfere in their training and in their mental health conditions. The survey of emerging themes demonstrated the movement traveled during the group task and allowed for presenting the most recurring themes.

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2 – writing of the article and relevant critical review of the intellectual content: Lucas

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