

ACADEMIC INTERNSHIP IN A LONG STAY INSTITUTION FOR THE ELDERLY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract: This study aims to report the experiences obtained by medical students at Faculdade Pernambucana de Saúde during their academic internship at the Cristo Redentor shelter in the city of Recife, Pernambuco. These activities took place in the first semester of 2021, provided by the field classes of the discipline “Practice in Primary Care”. The topics covered are a descriptive report, giving an initial focus on explaining when the shelter came about and how it is maintained until today. Subsequently, the main difficulties faced by students during the actions carried out with the elderly are detailed, especially those resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, it was also reported what learnings were acquired and how the internship impacted the academic training of students.

Keywords: Long-stay Institution for the Elderly; COVID-19; Internship.

INTRODUCTION

The increase in life expectancy has resulted in population aging, an achievement whose main catalyst was the improvement in health issues. ¹ Thus, it is expected that in 2050 there will be two billion elderly people in the world, and of these, the population aged 80 years and over is the one that grows the most, increasing from 11% to 19% by that period.²

Thus, it is common for a part of the elderly population to reside in nursing homes, today called Long-Term Institution for the Elderly (ILPI), an expression established by the Brazilian Society of Geriatrics and Gerontology in 2005. The word “asylum” was modified because it was usually used when referring to institutions for needy elderly people, evoking a negative configuration of poverty and abandonment. Therefore, the ILPI is an establishment for integral institutional care whose target audience is people aged 60 or over, who do not have the conditions to stay

with their family or in a single-cell home.³

However, institutions for the care of the elderly are not new. The first one built in Brazil was a farm to house Portuguese soldiers, in 1790, who were “advanced in years and tired of work”. This institution, at the time, was called the “House of the Invalides” and was inspired by the work of Louis XIV (Hôtel des Invalides) destined for heroes. Over time, institutions designed to house the elderly were known as asylums or hostels, more recently known as Long-Stay Institutions for the Elderly.³ Currently, a survey carried out by Ipea located 3548 institutions in Brazilian territory, of which 1617 declared to be philanthropic or affiliated.⁴

As longevity is not synonymous with quality of life, the population aging process has increased the frequency of psychiatric diseases, especially depression, which is very common among elderly people living in LTCFs in Brazil. Therefore, it is important that the health professionals of these institutions are attentive to the clinical conditions of the elderly, in order to improve their well-being, quality of life and self-esteem.⁵

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic was decreed, a disease responsible for causing the acute respiratory syndrome, caused by the SARS-COV-2 coronavirus, which has high transmissibility.⁶ It was noticed that the elderly represent the most vulnerable part of the population regarding the risk of developing the disease in a serious way. Proof of this is that, according to the Ministry of Health, in the period from January to March 2021, the highest number of deaths from COVID-19 occurred among people aged 60 and over. This is because the elderly usually have comorbidities, such as diabetes mellitus, kidney diseases, cardiovascular diseases, arterial hypertension and the physical fragility that the aging process brings. Therefore, this susceptibility to the disease changed the

routine in the ILPIs and had an abrupt impact on the quality of life of the elderly, since most of them did not receive family visits and had a sudden change in their daily lives.⁷

As Long Stay Institutions have a high number of elderly people together, the residents of these households are very vulnerable to infection, since the rate of transmission of the virus in these institutions is high.⁸

Faced with this scenario, the Brazilian Society of Geriatrics and Gerontology made a protocol called: “Recommendations for the Prevention and Control of Infections by Coronavirus (SARS-COV-2) in Long-Term Institutions for the Elderly (ILPI)”. This protocol serves to facilitate the management of elderly people in the face of the pandemic scenario by the multiprofessional health team, in addition to providing prophylaxis and surveillance actions adapted to each context.⁸

The objective of this experience report was to describe the activities carried out by medical students at the Cristo Redentor shelter, analyzing the impact they have on the quality of life of the elderly, as well as how these actions were influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

This is a descriptive study with a qualitative approach of the experience report type carried out in the first half of 2021.

The activities were carried out at Abrigo Cristo Redentor, a philanthropic ILPI located in Recife, Pernambuco, during six meetings lasting approximately three hours each. These actions are part of the practical classes of the discipline “Practice in Primary Care” of the first period of medicine students at Faculdade Pernambucana de Saúde (FPS).

Initially, the students were welcomed at the shelter by the FPS social worker responsible for coordinating the activity. In this

presentation, the assistant explained how the shelter worked, the rules of coexistence and what activities would be done by the students and what would be expected of these students. It is extremely important to note that all activities carried out during this period had the authorization of those responsible for the shelter and all safety protocols were followed - reduction in the number of students per shift, use of PPE, routine use of alcohol and minimum distance - to ensure the health of the elderly during the COVID 19 pandemic.

The information for this experience report was obtained through observations and analyzes made by the students during the activities at the ILPI, in addition to the theoretical references obtained through information documented by the Ministry of Health and the Pan American Health Organization.

RESULTS

During the internship period, the COVID-19 pandemic totally influenced the activities proposed by the students at the shelter, so that it was necessary to constantly use personal protective equipment (PPE), such as masks and *faceshields*, which made communication with people very difficult. the elderly, due to the muffled sound in conjunction with the natural hearing deficit with age.

In addition, the doctor-patient relationship was affected, as the use of PPE naturally built the image of a health professional, promoting the distancing of some individuals who saw the students as an authority, hindering the interaction between them.

Complications related to academics and the pandemic are also found in the decrease in the number of students per shift in the shelters, which exponentially limits the quality and quantity of activities. This is because restrictive measures were imposed to

protect the elderly, a risk group for infection by COVID-19. However, these protective measures also have their downside: increased loneliness. Many elderly people who are in the ILPI have not received visits from family and friends for years or even do not have anyone outside the shelter doors. All this, of course, causes a feeling of abandonment, amplified even more by the decrease in the number of students during the pandemic, who are essential to entertain and amuse the elderly, in order to make the experience at home lighter and happier.

Another important aspect perceived by the students was the difference in the patients' profile, which must directly influence the exercises proposed by the support team, but which do not occur this way. There are elderly people of different sexes, ages, tastes, cognitive ability and motor strength. This way, standardized dynamics make the participation of all the elderly in the house completely unfeasible.

During the practices, the volunteers called the elderly to participate, but many refused because they did not like the dynamics or even did not understand. On the other hand, some were seen who loved activities such as a board, but had physical limitations to reach the salon, making them, several times, forgotten in their beds where they cried and felt alone and abandoned. Therefore, it is necessary to urgently adapt the forms of activities in the shelter so that everyone can participate in an inclusive way and feel really belonging to that community.

Besides, outbreaks of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), such as syphilis, among the elderly were investigated during the visits of the stages, which shows a negligence regarding sex education. Although human physiology points to a decrease in hormonal activities, it is important that there is sex education through guidance on protection

methods, which was not developed during the internship period.

ACQUIRED BENEFITS AND QUALITIES

Medical training demands responsibility, good interpersonal relationships and the constant development of skills and competences from university students. With regard to communicative ability, the internship was able to provide an experience with people of numerous profiles, which some needed more attention or raised voice tone, while others were more reclusive to talk or did not want to talk. All this added to the students different ways of approaching and communicating, which vary according to the patient's profile, generating important lessons for medical practice.

Furthermore, the fear of public speaking is a prevalent fear in the university population. This fear is associated with the negative self-perception of the voice and little participation in oral communication activities. In this sense, the internship provides students with improvement in aspects involving speech, voice, gestures, gaze and body posture.^{9,10}

Another important learning process was the improvement in the doctor-patient relationship of the students, who were able to face different situations in which empathy and active listening were demanded of them. Many just wanted to vent, others wanted to talk about life and their past. Talk about their jobs, their hobbies, their families, their experiences. All this added a huge amount of baggage to all the volunteers who were able to put themselves in their shoes, even if mentally, and try to propose an activity or action that could alleviate these feelings of abandonment and loneliness on the part of the elderly in the house.

DISCUSSION

The Cristo Redentor shelter offers the elderly, in addition to food and lodging, medical and dental care, through volunteer professionals, psychological counseling, physiotherapy, social assistance, nursing services, leisure and artistic activities, aiming at constant improvement in the quality of life.

Currently, the shelter has the capacity to accommodate 180 elderly people, with 20 infirmary beds for support. However, due to the budgetary difficulty, exclusively philanthropic, today, with a lot of effort, only 110 elderly people are sheltered, highlighting the need for voluntary actions to improve the quality of life of the sheltered, especially in the current moment of the COVID-19 pandemic, which completely altered the functioning of the shelter.

Aiming for greater support, the nursing home has partnerships with higher education institutions, among them the FPS, which provide students through curricular internships to participate in essential activities with the elderly in the house. These students perform functions that aim to maintain the neurological, psychic and motor capacity, in addition to helping the emotional part of the elderly.

The maintenance of neuropsychic activity is provided by activities of cognitive and interpersonal function, essential for the quality of life of the elderly, as it directly influences their self-esteem, making them feel useful and independent. The feeling of being productive is essential for the physical, psycho-emotional and social balance of the elderly, as they maintain a purpose in life during the aging process. This way, activities are carried out to stimulate social contacts, a sense of belonging to the community and interactive activities such as music circles, art workshops and game championships. However, these social interaction activities

were hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic, due to restrictive social distancing actions, mainly because the residents of Cristo Redentor are considered a risk group and have high vulnerability.

As for the maintenance of motor skills, based on the understanding of the natural decline in motor skills throughout life, constant physical stimulation in shelter environments is important, since the decrease in the mechanical function of the body generates a functional disability, directly impacting in daily activities and, consequently, in the health of the elderly, making them more vulnerable to diseases³

Within this parameter, the activities developed by the students, within the Cristo Redentor Shelter, such as the use of balls, stretching, dances, among others, enhance the functional mechanical capacity of the elderly. This has the function of improving physical and mental conditioning, in addition to preventing injuries and delaying musculoskeletal atrophy. In addition, an important role of academics at the ILPI is to promote varied activities with the purpose of including elderly people with different profiles, tastes and physical and intellectual impairments.³

Furthermore, it is the duty of health students to provide emotional support to the sheltered, who are often abandoned by family members or are individuals who grew up on the fringes of society. The main pain of most elderly people is the withdrawal and seclusion from the outside world. Thus, from the moment an individual is removed from his/her own residence, he/she not only abandons a material asset, but also memories and experiences of a lifetime, needing to adapt completely to a new reality.

The students were able to witness, in their conversations in support of the elderly, numerous losses that the residents of Cristo

Redentor reported missing. The main lack they had was the daily contact with their families. Still others claim to miss sweeping their homes or washing their dishes; activities that are treated as routine. From this, it is possible to perceive how the institution impacts and totally changes the life of the elderly. It's a new way of living with norms, rules, schedules and an entirely different network of relationships. This way, the individuality of the subject is compromised, opening space for feelings of loneliness, worthlessness and even depression.³

Finally, despite all the difficulties, intern students played a fundamental role within the Cristo Redentor shelter in promoting complete health - total biopsychosocial well-being for those housed in the shelter. Although there were negative points to be addressed, the benefits brought by this practice in relation to personal evolution, improvement in oratory and the doctor-patient relationship, transform the students' vision, creating health students increasingly capable of serving not only people, but human beings, with their differences and needs.

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