

Assuming the Challenge of Developing Research Projects in Occupational Health Nursing

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SUMMARY

In today's society of uncertainty, we are witnessing a transformation of the economic, social, demographic, digital, ecological, and employment model, which faces unforeseen challenges. These challenges require reflecting beyond their consequences, and new workplace risks call for a debate on solutions beyond traditional ones. In the specific context of companies, the main functions of occupational health nursing are to prevent, promote, protect, and restore workers' health. The integration of research into nursing practice entails the better implementation of scientific advances. Although in the real world of professional nursing practice, there is a discrepancy between the knowledge obtained through research and clinical practice, practicing based on care plans, solid practice guidelines, and scientific evidence is a maxim.

Research is a necessary, unavoidable and inherent condition for occupational health nursing. In this way, the ability to study this area of nursing knowledge in depth, to design research initiatives in the area of their competences and to have the possibility of implementing the results obtained, allows the consolidation of the preventive culture in companies. Consequently, the practice of research guarantees the updating of professional knowledge, promotes a balanced evaluation of praxis and establishes instruments of communication between related parties. It also invites self-critical reflection prior to decision-making and quantifies the cost-effectiveness of nursing practice. Furthermore, it provokes the formulation of new questions and generates both scientific evidence and added value in the discipline. These aspects translate into an improvement in the efficiency and effectiveness of

the care provided in companies and greater safety in nursing interventions [1]. All of these realities strengthen the professional role of the speciality and aim to incorporate the value of research in the daily practice of the profession [2].

The cross-cutting nature of research equally affects the different levels of the company regardless of sector, activity, size, or type of risks. To a greater or lesser extent, the development of this aspect and the implementation of the findings have implications throughout the worker's professional life. In this context, the main functions of occupational health nursing are to prevent, promote, protect, and restore the health of the working population in its field of action [3]. In the scientific evolution adapted to the demands and needs related to health in organizations, nursing research is defined as a scientific process that validates and improves existing knowledge

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and generates new knowledge that directly and indirectly influences its practice [4]. In recent years, various entities related to this discipline include research competence as an asset, among them: the Federation of Occupational Health Nurses within the European Union (FOHNEU) [5], the American Association of Occupational Health Nurses (AAOHN) [6, 7], the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) [8], and the Association of Occupational Health Nurse Practitioners (AOHNP) [9]. It has also been included by the Scientific Committee on Occupational Health Nursing (SCOHN) [10, 11], the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe [12], the Occupational Health Nursing Research Center [13], and the Faculty of Occupational Health Nursing (FOHN) [14]. In addition to their research capacity, these institutions have incorporated the following areas of action: preventive, care, teaching, management, legal, and expert.

At the same time, various international professional forums encourage this research facet. The Global Commission on the Future of Work advocates establishing lines of research to evaluate people-centered economic, social, and labor programs [15]. The National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) presents a scientific agenda to stimulate innovative research and define best practices in the workplace [16]. In its Working for Health Action Plan 2022-2030, the World Health Organization (WHO) calls for the allocation of nursing resources to research proposals to be designed [17] and to study the influence of climate change on workers' health [18]. The International Labour Organization (ILO) is furthering the comparative analysis of national strategies on new work scenarios in the face of the transformation of the world of work [19]. In turn, the European Union strategic framework on health and safety at work 2021-2027 takes up the challenge of addressing musculoskeletal disorders, respiratory diseases, mental health, cancer, harassment, gender bias, and the care sector, among others, by stepping up research [20]. The Global strategic directions for nursing 2021-2025 and The National Academies of Sciences propose increasing training to develop nursing research projects that respond to the needs and demands of workers [21, 22]. Among these proposals,

the International Council of Nurses (ICN) stresses evaluating the work environment, injuries, or illnesses derived from nursing work in different countries [23]. Finally, the American Nurses Association (ANA) enterprise 2023-2025 strategic plan includes research innovation projects demonstrating nursing care's transformative impact [24].

The current transformation of the economic, social, and labor model, together with the digitalization and relocation of work, is known as Industry 4.0. In this new uncertain reality, emerging risks are emerging where their prevention poses multiple challenges and allows research to be carried out using different approaches that are not mutually exclusive. Although the task is extensive, occupational health does not have an academic and research tradition compared to other areas of health. There are differences in background, current status, usefulness, application, activity evolution, systematic assessment of its validity, and the generation of relevant scientific evidence [25, 26]. Situations that further reinforce the benefits of the combination of research and professional practice constitute the basis for safe, quality, and cost-effective care for workers. This approach is underpinned by ethical and professional responsibility and is based on scientific evidence [27]. However, in the fact of accepting and incorporating an innovation, some factors limit the transfer of knowledge to practice: the profile of the professional, the culture of the organization, the knowledge of the innovation, the channels of communication, self-improvement that conditions integration into praxis [28] and even environmental factors [29].

In the professional nursing reality, there is a discrepancy between the knowledge obtained from theoretical research and actual clinical practice [30], an aspect that coexists with a solid relationship between scientific production and the quality of care provided [31]. Based on this premise, the following factors determine the development of the research profile in occupational health nursing: lack of time during the working day, inadequate training in research methodology, professional isolation [32], care pressure, and the scant research tradition [33]. In addition, the lack of knowledge in the practice of critical reading, not having enough time to read

scientific literature, barriers related to the profile of the company, and the limited capacity to implement the results [34], are issues that are a constant in both national and international studies [28], are also pointed out. Finally, it is also necessary to highlight the resistance to change [2], the limited support of managers and colleagues, the lack of social recognition, the lack of systematic reviews with a nursing perspective, and the absence of stable lines of research and nursing leaders in this field [35]. Issues that would promote a critical spirit, professional autonomy, control in decision-making, and the projection of an image as a profession, as well as increasing the body of nursing knowledge.

Research in occupational risk prevention analyzes the possible relationships between exposure to risks and damage to health. Among other things, it aims to detect the damage caused by accidents, incidents, occupational diseases, or non-traumatic pathologies caused or aggravated by work and identify groups with specific intervention needs [36]. From this premise and in a post-COVID-19 context, the FOHNEU has identified the following priority lines of research related to occupational nursing: workers' access to the supply of nursing services, the impact of the pandemic on the role of the specialty and autonomy in the development of their professional competences. It also points out the approach to persistent COVID-19 in organizations, mental health problems related to the pandemic, and the interaction with the different members of the occupational risk prevention service [37]. In parallel, the impact of the pandemic on social inequalities and the identification of occupations with higher risks and which working conditions favor these situations are of interest [38]. These proposals are in addition to other lines of interest such as teleworking, digitalization, the new demographic reality, work intensification, cancer, incorporation after a prolonged absence, social determinants, and the effects of climate change or persistent COVID-19. Nevertheless, the ANA challenges nurses to lead holistically and cross-sectorally in workplace wellness programs [24].

Research ultimately aims to improve people's quality of life. In the various roles of the occupational nurse, whether as a researcher, consumer of

scientific literature, or transmitter of this knowledge through various media, we must be aware of the benefits of its application both among workers and in the development of the discipline. A critical spirit with a humanistic basis, scientific motivation from a holistic perspective, and research curiosity are more than necessary.

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