

The Crisis in Nursing Leadership in Saudi Arabia: Tackling a Significant Challenge

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Abstract

Health systems are experiencing health crises and pandemics that weaken their ability to provide health care to communities and patients. Nursing is the first line of defense in health care, and therefore plays a critical role in responding to crises and pandemics and ensuring the continuity of health care. This review explores the multifaceted roles of nurses during crises and pandemics, including education, surveillance, vaccination management, and post-pandemic recovery. It highlights barriers faced by nurses, such as time constraints, scarce resources, communication challenges, and inadequate technology integration. Furthermore, the review explores strategies to enhance nursing capacity, such as prioritizing the distribution of personal protective equipment, enhancing syndromic surveillance, investing in technology, and expanding home care. Addressing these challenges and implementing forward-looking strategies enhances the role of nurses in crisis and pandemic management, ensuring preparedness for future crises.

Keywords: Nursing, pandemics, crisis management, Telenursing, Emergency Response.

1. Introduction

Recently, health systems have witnessed many crises that have imposed threats to public health and the ability of health systems to continue providing health services and imposed unprecedented demands on resources and staff [1]. The crises facing health care systems, such as earthquakes, floods, and pandemics, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, impose the need for organized and rapid responses to protect communities and continue providing health care during the stages of crises until recovery [2,3]. Nurses constitute about 60% of health care workers, and they are the first line of defense in health care [4]. Nurses play an important role in confronting crises and pandemics and the continuity of providing health and nursing care [5]. In addition, the role of nurses in confronting crises and pandemics extends beyond direct patient care to include leadership, advocacy, community engagement, and management of complex health care operations during emergencies [5,6].

The importance of the role of nurses in crises and epidemics stems from their role in patient-centered care and their experiences that allow them to quickly adapt and respond to crises [7]. Nurses bring a unique combination of clinical skills, emotional intelligence, and resilience to the front lines, managing life-saving interventions, coordinating with multidisciplinary teams, or providing psychological support to patients and families [8].

During pandemics, nurses face increased responsibilities, including infection control, triage, and medication management. The COVID-19 pandemic has exemplified these roles, with nurses not only providing direct patient care, but also participating in public health campaigns, managing resource constraints, and addressing the psychological and emotional burden on both patients and healthcare teams [9]. Nurses' ability to adapt to evolving circumstances, such as changing care models and incorporating telehealth solutions, highlights their importance in maintaining continuity of care. In addition, nurses play pivotal roles in educating patients, advocating for equitable access to healthcare, and helping to build trust and collaboration during crises and pandemics [10].

Accordingly, this review aims to explore and highlight the diverse and influential roles of nurses in crisis and epidemic management, emphasizing their importance in maintaining public health and community well-being.

The Role of Nursing Knowledge and Competency in Crisis Response

Nursing knowledge and competence form the foundation for effective crisis and pandemic management. Nursing roles in crisis response include integrating evidence-based practices, conducting rapid triage, addressing psychological needs, and advocating for vulnerable populations. Nurses ensure that care delivery remains

comprehensive and adaptable [9]. Their expertise extends beyond immediate response, shaping long-term recovery and resilience, underscoring their indispensable role in protecting public health.

Key components of nursing knowledge and competence

- Evidence-based practices in crisis management

Evidence-based practices are at the core of nursing interventions during crises. By adhering to scientifically validated guidelines, nurses make informed decisions to improve patient outcomes. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, nurses effectively implemented isolation protocols, used personal protective equipment, and treated patients with respiratory complications, in accordance with global health system guidelines [11].

- Rapid triage and emergency response

Triage is a critical skill in crisis management, allowing nurses to prioritize care based on the severity of patients' conditions. This ensures that limited resources are allocated efficiently, with the most severe cases receiving immediate attention. Nurses are trained to assess not only physical injuries but also psychological distress, enabling a holistic approach to care during emergencies [12].

- First aid Psychological

During crises, the mental health of affected individuals is as important as their physical health. Nurses play a pivotal role in providing psychological first aid, which includes active listening, reassurance, and connecting individuals to appropriate mental health resources. This support helps mitigate long-term psychological effects, such as anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) [13].

- Tailored care for diverse populations

Crises often disproportionately impact vulnerable populations such as the elderly, children, and those with chronic conditions. Nurses' cultural competence and understanding of the social determinants of health enable them to provide care that meets the specific needs of these populations [14]. For example, nurses may develop tailored care plans for elderly patients with multiple comorbidities or educate underserved communities about disease prevention [15].

Nurses Beyond the Bedside: Educators and Advocates

- Community Education

Nurses are integral to community education efforts during crises. They raise awareness about preventative measures, such as vaccination campaigns and hygiene practices, and empower communities with the knowledge they need to protect themselves [16].

- Advocating for Equitable Care

Nurses advocate for the rights of marginalized groups, ensuring they have equitable access to health care resources. By voicing the needs of underserved populations, nurses work to close gaps in care delivery and promote equity in resource distribution [17].

Expanding knowledge for long-term recovery

Nursing knowledge and competence remain vital during the recovery phase of crises. Nurses contribute to [18]:

- Rebuilding health care systems.
- Supporting rehabilitation for individuals and communities.
- Participating in the evaluation of response efforts to improve future preparedness.

Nurses' Role in Crisis Response

Nurses are an essential component of health care systems during crises, taking on diverse and influential roles that extend beyond clinical care. Their contributions, rooted in professional expertise and compassionate engagement, span multiple domains, including professional, spiritual, economic and social dimensions [19]. These roles are critical to ensuring effective responses to crises and pandemics and the continuity of health care delivery.

Professional Roles

In crises, nurses assume leadership roles that require collaboration, adaptability, and strategic decision-making. They work closely with healthcare professionals to ensure care is delivered smoothly, even in resource-constrained settings.

- **Managing Complex Health Conditions:** Nurses have the knowledge and skills to meet the multiple and complex needs of patients, including the elderly, children, and individuals with chronic conditions.

Their ability to manage multifaceted health conditions ensures that vulnerable populations receive comprehensive, tailored care during crises [20].

- **Developing and Distributing Support Packages:** Nurses play a pivotal role in designing and distributing support packages for vulnerable populations. These packages often include essential medical supplies, nutritional resources, and educational materials to enable individuals and communities to cope effectively with crises [21].
- **Strengthening Healthcare System Preparedness:** Through training and leadership, nurses work to strengthen healthcare system preparedness for emergencies. They participate in simulation exercises, develop crisis management protocols, and mentor healthcare teams to ensure they are prepared for a variety of scenarios [22].

Spiritual and Psychological Roles

Nurses' holistic approach to care extends to addressing the spiritual and mental well-being of patients and colleagues. In times of crisis, these roles are instrumental in promoting hope, resilience, and emotional stability.

- **Providing Compassionate Care:** By recognizing and addressing patients' cultural, spiritual, and personal needs, nurses provide a sense of comfort and reassurance. This personalized care approach helps individuals cope with the stress and uncertainty of crises [23].
- **Collaborating with Support Staff:** Nurses often collaborate with psychologists, religious leaders, and social workers to provide comprehensive emotional support. This multidisciplinary approach ensures that the mental and spiritual health needs of affected individuals are met [24].
- **Promoting Positive Environments:** Nurses play a critical role in creating positive environments within healthcare facilities and communities. Their ability to inspire hope and optimism lifts the spirits of patients and colleagues, contributing to overall emotional resilience [25].

Economic roles

Nurses contribute significantly to the economic sustainability of healthcare systems during crises by improving resource management and enhancing productivity.

- **Resource optimization:** In resource-constrained settings, nurses are responsible for ensuring the efficient use of medical supplies, including personal protective equipment, medications, and other essential items. Their careful management helps expand resource availability during protracted emergencies [26].
- **Productivity and cost-effectiveness:** By streamlining workflows and reducing waste, nurses enhance the cost-effectiveness of healthcare operations. Their ability to maintain high-quality care under challenging circumstances highlights their economic value [22].
- **Advocating for equitable resource allocation:** Nurses often advocate for equitable resource allocation, ensuring that underserved and marginalized communities receive the support they need [22,26].

Social roles

In addition to their clinical and economic contributions, nurses play an integral role in promoting social cohesion, trust, and resilience during crises. Their engagement with communities helps dispel fear, reduce misinformation, and promote collective well-being.

- **Educating communities:** Nurses are frontline educators, providing accurate and timely information to combat misinformation. Their efforts to raise awareness of preventive measures, such as vaccination and hygiene practices, are essential in managing public health crises [26].
- **Supporting families and vulnerable populations:** Nurses provide care to families of patients, ensuring they receive emotional and psychological support. They also advocate for vulnerable populations, addressing their unique needs during emergencies [27].
- **Promoting mental resilience and social cohesion:** Nurses foster a sense of unity and resilience within communities. Nurses encourage collaboration and mutual support between patients and the community, helping communities navigate the challenges of crises together [13].

Phases of Crisis Management: The Integral Role of Nurses

Effective crisis management is a dynamic, cyclical process that involves multiple stages, each of which requires a coordinated response to minimize impact and promote recovery. Nurses play a pivotal role in each stage, from preparation and mitigation to recovery and assessment.

Preparedness and Mitigation: Building Resilience Before Crises

Preparedness is the cornerstone of effective crisis management. Nurses contribute significantly to this phase by identifying vulnerabilities, assessing risks, and helping communities build resilience to potential threats.

- **Proactive Planning:** Nurses collaborate with healthcare teams and community stakeholders to develop comprehensive emergency response plans. These plans address potential scenarios, resource allocation, and role delegation [24].
- **Risk Assessment:** Nurses assessing local health trends, environmental risks, and population vulnerabilities, nurses help identify areas of concern that require targeted interventions [21].
- **Community Education:** Nurses are key educators in spreading awareness about preventive measures, such as vaccinations, hygiene practices, and emergency preparedness kits. Their outreach efforts enhance community preparedness for crises [26].

Response: Providing Critical Care in Times of Crisis

The response phase is characterized by immediate action to manage and mitigate the impact of a crisis. Nurses are often on the front lines, providing life-saving care and ensuring the continuity of essential health services [28].

- **Emergency Planning:** Nurses activate and adhere to pre-established emergency protocols, ensuring an organized and effective response.
- **Triage and Critical Care:** Nurses' expertise in triage enables them to prioritize care based on severity, ensuring that critical cases receive immediate attention. Their ability to manage mass casualties is critical in large-scale crises.
- **Psychological First Aid:** Nurses address the emotional and psychological needs of individuals affected by a crisis, providing reassurance and connecting them to mental health resources.
- **Infection Control:** In pandemics, nurses implement and enforce strict infection control measures, such as isolation protocols, to prevent the spread of disease.

Recovery: Rebuilding

After the immediate crisis has passed, the recovery phase focuses on helping communities rebuild and adapt to new realities. Nurses play a key role in this phase by providing long-term care and promoting resilience [29].

- **Rehabilitation and Long-Term Care:** Nurses support individuals recovering from physical and psychological trauma, ensuring access to rehabilitation services and follow-up care.
- **Community Adaptation:** Nurses work with local leaders and healthcare teams to address the long-term impacts of the crisis, such as rebuilding healthcare infrastructure and restoring access to essential services.
- **Health Promotion:** Nurses led initiatives aimed at preventing secondary health problems, such as chronic illness or mental health issues, that may arise from the crisis.

Evaluation: Learning from the Crisis

The evaluation phase is essential for identifying strengths and weaknesses in the crisis response, allowing for continuous improvement in preparedness and management strategies [29,30].

- **Review of response efforts:** Nurses provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of emergency plans, identifying areas for improvement.
- **Gap Analysis:** By analyzing what worked and what didn't, nurses help highlight gaps in resources, training, or coordination that need to be addressed.
- **Learning Integration:** Lessons learned are incorporated into updated emergency plans, ensuring that future responses are more effective and resilient.

Future directions for strengthening primary care in epidemic preparedness

Enhancing nurses' capacity for epidemic preparedness is critical for effective public health responses. Prioritizing the allocation of personal protective equipment (PPE) ensures their safety and continuity of care. Empowering nurses with syndromic surveillance tools and clear communication channels facilitates early outbreak detection and coordinated responses [31]. Expanding home-based nursing services and integrating technology, such as telemedicine and remote monitoring, improves care delivery while reducing hospital burdens. Additionally, providing nursing-specific clinical guidelines and ongoing training equips nurses with the skills to manage infectious diseases and adapt to crisis care models [32]. These strategies reinforce nurses' pivotal role in managing future public health crises.

Conclusion:

Nurses are indispensable in managing healthcare crises and pandemics, serving as the backbone of healthcare systems. Their roles span a broad spectrum, from frontline care and public health education to vaccination efforts and system preparedness. Despite their critical contributions, nurses face significant barriers, including resource shortages, communication gaps, and inadequate technological infrastructure, which hinder their ability to deliver effective care. To strengthen nursing capacity and pandemic preparedness, it is essential to prioritize the distribution of PPE, enhance surveillance systems, invest in digital tools, and provide continuous education

and training. Addressing these areas will not only enhance the resilience of healthcare systems but also ensure that nurses are empowered to meet the challenges of future pandemics effectively. Recognizing and supporting their efforts is critical to building a robust, adaptive healthcare system capable of responding to global health crises.

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