

The Role of Nursing Professionals in Crisis Management: Enhancing Patient Care and Support in Emergency and Mental Health Settings

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ABSTRACT

Nursing plays a pivotal role in crisis management to promote public health, provide patient care, and support communities during crises. Nurses are integral to the health care system's response to acute and ongoing crises, including pandemics, natural disasters, and other public health emergencies. Their involvement spans all phases of crisis management, from preparedness and prevention to response and recovery. This review highlights the multifaceted roles nurses play in disaster scenarios, focusing on their clinical, leadership, and communication skills, as well as their ability to support mental health. It also addresses the urgent need for increased education, training, and resources to enhance nurses' crisis management capabilities. Furthermore, it examines the challenges nurses have faced in responding to past health crises, such as SARS, H1N1, and COVID-19, and the lessons learned from these experiences. By assessing the competencies required for effective crisis response and the contributions of professional nursing organizations, this study calls for transformation of nursing education, policy, and practice to ensure nurses are prepared for future crises. The findings underscore the importance of nurses' role in saving lives, reducing suffering, and ensuring the resilience of health systems in times of disaster and crisis.

KEYWORDS: Nursing, public health emergencies, crisis management, mental health support.

Introduction

Global health systems are facing challenges and crises that undermine their ability to fulfill their duties, as these crises negatively affect the health of societies [1].

In disasters and crises, nurses are among the most critical first responders, providing essential medical care, ensuring public health, and supporting communities during

difficult crises [2]. Their roles range from planning and preparedness to operational emergency response, making them indispensable in disaster and crisis scenarios. Skilled nurses deliver high-quality care by providing safe, effective, timely, efficient, and equitable care [3,4]. This behavior aligns with the definition adopted by the U.S. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) that good health care is “doing the right thing for the right patient at the right time in the right way, to achieve the best possible outcomes” [5].

Therefore, nurses must increase their knowledge and possess the skills that enable them to deal with crises and disasters, which are represented in the ability to identify hierarchies, plan for response to crises and emergencies, regular practice, proper use of emergency equipment, protect individuals, follow communication methods and channels, participate in evaluating exercises, and modify the response plan if necessary [6]. A better understanding of nurses' specific competencies and their educational and training needs in disaster and crisis nursing is the first and essential step to enhancing their ability to provide optimal health care services during crises [7].

Every nurse must be responsible for confronting crises. According to studies conducted in several health systems, nursing plays an important role in confronting crises and recovering from them. The presence of nursing also reduces the mortality rate by (50%-70%) [8]. Moreover, the technical competence and ability of nurses to deal with medical devices and equipment, and the ability to perform roles in unconventional tasks are among the most important clinical skills that help nursing in facing and managing crises [9,10].

Therefore, this review aims to determine the role of nursing in facing and managing crises and providing health care services.

General Roles of Nurses in Disasters

In disaster and crisis response, nursing plays a pivotal role through a wide and diverse range of clinical and community skills. Nursing works alongside all specialized medical teams at all stages of disasters and crises before, during and after they occur. The role of nursing in dealing with a crisis before it occurs is to raise community awareness, promote public health, and implement interventions aimed at improving community public health [11]. During crises, nursing provides various medical services to the community, including first aid, clinical care, medications, and allocating available resources in proportion to the severity of medical conditions, and classifying those affected by disasters and crises according to medical needs [12,13]. After the crisis, nurses also monitor ongoing health needs, whether physical or psychological, and work to provide appropriate support for each case. In addition, nurses contribute to organizing logistics related to disaster response by developing operational protocols and safety procedures, in addition to conducting statistical analysis of data at the individual and community levels [13,14]. Their role also includes ensuring the continuity of health care provision under difficult circumstances and coordinating efforts between different work teams to meet the challenges resulting from disasters and crises [15].

In addition to the tasks and role of nursing in crises, nursing contributes to

developing, implementing and monitoring crisis and emergency preparedness plans, supervising the safety of health teams and the use of personal protective equipment, and continuous communication between various medical specialties [16]. The role of nursing in crises also includes managing shelters, blood donation campaigns, community awareness, providing psychosocial support, and ensuring the continuity of services for the elderly, chronic diseases, and pregnant women in times of crises and disasters [16,17]. Disasters impose enormous pressure on health care systems, and these conditions often evaluate the competence, knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal commitment of nurses as health care professionals.

The Role of Nurses in Mental Health Crisis

Crises, disasters, and pandemics affect the mental health of people exposed to them, leading to emotional and psychological exhaustion that negatively affects the health of society and the speed of recovery from crises and pandemics [18]. Therefore, in addition to the above-mentioned role of nursing in crises, one of the most important efforts made to respond is to provide mental health support to society and medical teams, which requires training and qualifying nurses to recognize the signs and symptoms of mental health and provide first-aid services to crisis victims, and then continue to support and direct them to specialists to provide psychological and mental support in a way that preserves their health and safety and ensures recovery from crises and disasters [19].

Nurses' readiness to respond to crises: Lessons from Past Experiences

Over the past few decades, health systems have experienced numerous medical crises and emergencies, such as the SARS outbreak in 2003, the H1N1 influenza pandemic in 2009, and COVID-19 in 2019. Analyzing and studying the response to these crises and the lessons learned contribute to nursing in managing crises and disasters in the future. Hick et al., (2020) indicates that there are significant gaps in the preparedness of health systems for crises as well as the development of health forces, especially nursing, which this crisis negatively affected them and their ability to confront the crisis [20]. Despite numerous studies calling for improving nursing preparedness to respond to crises and disasters [21,22], previous experiences have not been optimally leveraged.

A significant issue that has not been addressed is the lack of knowledge among nurses about crisis preparedness, with one study indicating that over 78% of nurses have low levels of knowledge about emergency preparedness and response to crises and disasters [23]. In addition, there is a low level of educational content for nursing students in colleges and universities and an absence of educational content about emergency and crisis preparedness [24], with no evidence that students who receive this education achieve proficiency in this knowledge and skills [25]. Many nurses also have concerns and anxiety about their personal safety during crisis response, which weakens their ability to deal with and manage crises. Studies indicate that adequate knowledge about crises such as infectious diseases, their transmission and prevention methods make nurses and health care workers more capable and efficient in dealing with them [26,27].

Nurses who feel professionally valued and comfortable in their work environment

also feel responsible for serving the community in times of crisis and emergency, which requires providing, recognizing, and maintaining professional care [28]. Developing and evaluating training programs for nurse leaders is essential to improving health system response to emergencies. These programs can enhance skills in communication, business management, and leadership, and through them, nurse leaders can improve health system response, patient outcomes, staff well-being, and hospital financial stability [30].

Learning from past experiences of health systems in dealing with crises and identifying gaps enhances nursing's ability to respond to crises. Therefore, it is important to take critical steps to transform nursing education, practice, and policies across health care and public health systems, which will improve the preparedness, safety, and support of the nursing workforce in the face of crises. Factors that influence nurses' preparedness include research funding, education and accreditation, the responsibilities of hospitals and health care organizations, and the role of professional nursing associations [30]. Interactions between nurses, health care organizations, and government have been identified as a critical factor for effective crisis response [31].

Essential Skills for Nurses in Crisis Management

The role of nurses in disaster preparedness and emergency response requires a set of specialized skills to deal with the challenges and risks associated with crises. The most prominent of these skills is leadership, as nursing plays leadership roles for healthcare workers, volunteers and the community in crises, response and recovery [32]. Nursing must also have the skills and ability to adapt, as crises and disasters are constantly and rapidly changing, which requires the ability and skill of nursing to respond to them and deal with them immediately to reduce the negative effects. In addition, effective communication skills are of great importance during crises, as nurses must maintain continuous and clear communication with medical teams, patients and their families to ensure everyone's safety and achieve the highest levels of effectiveness in providing care [33]. Nursing workers face sudden and unexpected challenges while managing and responding to crises, pandemics and others, which require them to have the knowledge, skills and ability to deal with them quickly and effectively, and the ability to make informed decisions that ensure the provision of care in a safe and effective manner. Together, these skills are essential to ensuring a professional and reliable response in emergencies, contributing to improved health outcomes and reduced risks in times of crisis [32,34].

The Role of Professional Nursing Organizations

Professional nursing organizations play a critical role in ensuring that their members and the professionals have the expertise and support to respond to unexpected events that threaten the health of the public. These organizations have advocated for the support and protection of nurses during past disasters and continue to do so today. The Trilateral Council of Nursing (Trilateral Council) is an alliance of five nursing organizations focused on leadership in education, practice, and research. Working with specialty nursing organizations, such as the Emergency Nurses Association and the Council of Public Health Nursing Organizations, the Trilateral Council can advocate for a broad, forward-looking national plan to advance disaster nursing and

PHEPR. A particular focus should be on caring for individuals, families, and communities disproportionately affected by disasters [35]. Nursing organizations that unite around the COVID-19 response can use this experience to create a foundation for preparing the profession to meet future disaster-related challenges [36].

Nurses' Success Stories in Crisis Response

Over the past decades, nurses have provided vital responses to a variety of health disaster scenarios, varying in scope and impact. Although all these disasters have been tragic and devastating, the efforts of nurses, both as healthcare workers and volunteers, have contributed significantly to saving lives and reducing human suffering. The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the most prominent recent examples of nurses' response to public health disasters worldwide. In areas where the virus has spread widely, hospitals have transformed into emergency facilities specializing in the care of COVID-19 patients, with wards filled with patients due to severe overcrowding. In this context, nurses have taken on exceptional responsibilities under difficult and complex circumstances. Despite the shortage of human supplies and equipment, nurses have been able to effectively meet the needs of patients, contributing to saving many lives at a time when healthcare systems were paralyzed under the weight of the pandemic. With the availability of vaccines, nurses played a pivotal role in distributing them to the community, in addition to their active participation in awareness campaigns that aimed to enhance confidence in vaccines and explain their importance in combating the virus [37].

Conclusion:

Nurses play a fundamental and multifaceted role in crisis and disaster management, significantly impacting patient care and the overall effectiveness of healthcare responses. Their contributions are critical not only in providing direct clinical care but also in leading disaster response efforts, supporting mental health, and ensuring continuity of essential services under extreme stress. However, despite their pivotal role, significant gaps in crisis preparedness, education, and training remain within the nursing profession. Lessons learned from previous health emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, highlight the need for comprehensive training programs, improved crisis management protocols, and enhanced support for nurses in times of crisis. Moving forward, it is critical to focus on developing the necessary competencies in nursing education, strengthening professional networks, and fostering leadership at all levels to ensure nurses are fully prepared to meet the challenges of future disasters. By addressing these gaps, the nursing workforce can become more resilient, effective, and able to manage the complex demands of crisis situations, ultimately improving health outcomes and reducing the impact of global health emergencies.

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