

# Survey of bioethics teaching in Nursing Courses of Brazilian Federal Universities

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## Abstract

This documentary research paper aims to identify the presence of bioethics, or Bioethics related themes, as subject matter in undergraduate nursing courses of Brazilian Federal Universities. As basic inclusion criteria for the sample selection, only the universities which provided the Pedagogical Political Projects of the Nursing Courses online were included. We identified in the collected results from 16 institutions (27%), which met the criteria, that eight Universities have Bioethics as curriculum component or specific theme (50% of the total number) of, and that there is no teaching of Bioethics or related themes, in the other eight universities. Seven of these Universities (43.75%) address the following issues: ethics, nursing law, nursing practice and deontology. And one university (6.25%) does not address the issue. It is concluded that the subject matter bioethics and/or related themes are not present in all curricula of the Nursing courses in Brazilian Federal Universities identified in this study. The lack of curricular standardization in relation to the offer of the subject leads to the conclusion that the professional training in nursing is impaired and that it also established discrepancy among courses offered by different institutions.

**Key words:** Bioethics. Ethics. Nursing teaching.

## Resumo

### Ensino da bioética nos cursos de Enfermagem das universidades federais brasileiras

Trata-se de artigo de pesquisa documental voltado a identificar a oferta da disciplina ou da temática bioética nos cursos de graduação em enfermagem das universidades federais brasileiras. Adotou-se como critério básico de seleção de amostra a disponibilização *online* os Projetos Políticos Pedagógicos dos cursos de Enfermagem. Foram identificadas 16 instituições (27%) que atendiam ao critério, sendo que a bioética consta na grade curricular ou é apresentada como temática específica em oito delas (50%). A outra metade da amostra não oferta a disciplina ou discute transversalmente o tema, embora sete cursos (43,75%) ofereçam disciplinas correlatas: ética; legislação em enfermagem; exercício da enfermagem e; deontologia. Verificou-se que um curso (6,25 %) não oferta nenhuma disciplina referente à temática. A falta de padronização curricular em relação à oferta da disciplina permite concluir que a formação profissional em enfermagem é prejudicada e que isso também estabelece discrepância entre os cursos das diferentes instituições.

**Palavras-chave:** Bioética. Ética. Ensino da enfermagem.

## Resumen

### Enseñanza de bioética en los cursos de Enfermería de Universidades Federales Brasileñas

Se trata de artículo de investigación documental con el objetivo de identificar la oferta de la disciplina o de la temática bioética en los cursos de grado en enfermería de las universidades federales brasileñas. Se adoptó como criterio fundamental de selección de la muestra la puesta a disposición en línea del proyecto político-pedagógico del curso de Enfermería. Se identificaron 16 instituciones (27%) que cumplían con el criterio, y en ocho de las cuales figuraba la Bioética en el plan de estudios o temática específica (50%). La otra mitad de la muestra no ofrece la disciplina o discute transversalmente el tema, aunque siete cursos, (43,75%) ofrezcan disciplinas correlacionadas: ética, legislación en enfermería, ejercicio de la enfermería; deontología. Se comprobó que un curso (6,25%) no ofrece ninguna disciplina referente a la temática. La falta de estandarización curricular en relación a la oferta de la disciplina permite concluir que la formación profesional en enfermería está perjudicada y que eso también establece divergencia entre los cursos de las distintas instituciones.

**Palabras-clave:** Bioética. Ética. Enseñanza de enfermería.

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Bioethics must have as one of its primary factors the biotechnological advancements, especially in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Modern technology has provided new powers to men, affecting their way of acting and establishing a different rhythm than the one that determined the transformation of methods and techniques in the past <sup>1</sup>. That is why the conflicting themes and situations in the area of health are, most of the times, related to the scientific advancements and the technological development <sup>2</sup>. As a result, the importance of education and qualification in bioethics is emphasized as being, above all, a process of sensitization and qualification, focused on the development of values associated with exercising citizenship <sup>3</sup>.

In this sense, when there is a theoretical reflection regarding the teaching of ethics and bioethics, it is understood that the construction of new knowledge, competences, attitudes and skills in nursing must be based on the theoretical conceptions of the ethical and bioethical fields, applied to the construction of moral awareness. This pedagogical process, reflected and lived by the graduates, may be able to make them capable of working professionally, facing the cultural plurality of life in society <sup>4</sup>.

According to the 3<sup>rd</sup> article of the Nursing Graduation Course's National Curricular Guidelines, Resolution CNE/CES 3, the teaching of nursing has the objective of training qualified professionals, with generalist, humanist, critical and reflective qualification, guided by ethical principles and technical, scientific and intellectual strictness <sup>5</sup>. These orientations aim at training professionals who are capable of dedicating themselves to Nursing with an effective and responsible performance.

Therefore, it is important that, during their nursing qualification, the student receives knowledge that facilitates their future performance, facilitating the work process management, considering, especially, the application of this reflection about bioethics to nursing. Bioethics is considered here as the branch of ethics applied to what simulates the current human condition the most, because it concerns the main conflicts that arise in daily professional practice. Bioethics induces reflection which, in turn, stimulates the resolution of conflicts in an individual and a collective level, in all levels of the professional performance scopes <sup>6</sup>.

Considering that professional qualification cannot be reduced to incrementing the deontological knowledge, but it should incorporate learning processes that allow the ethical and moral development of the student as a person, in their individual

and social dimensions <sup>7</sup>, this article aims at identifying the presence of the subject matter Bioethics or the theme of bioethics in the nursing graduation courses of Brazilian federal universities. We believe that the bioethical reflection in these courses, made possible by the introduction of concepts and the identification of its relevance in assistance, teaching and research, is essential to an autonomous, decisive and humanized professional practice.

## Method

This is a documentary research article <sup>8</sup>, based on a systematic survey of the Nursing course's Political Pedagogical Project (PPP), made available online in the Federal Universities' websites. Such PPP is the official document that contains the educational proposal for the student's professional qualification.

The research universe was made up of 58 Brazilian federal universities and the selected sample had 16 universities, 27% of the total, that met the selection criteria adopted. The first of these criteria, which defined the inclusion of the university in the sample, was the availability of this Nursing Course PPP online in the format of a text document or in Portable Document Format (PDF). The second criterion is related to the existence of the following items in the online version of the PPP: 1) the curricular component definition; 2) indication of which semester of the course the discipline is offered; 3) the discipline's workload. The data survey was carried out in the period of June 7<sup>th</sup> to June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012 and the information surveyed was organized according to the methodological sequence detailed below:

*1<sup>st</sup> Survey of the Brazilian federal universities;*

*2<sup>nd</sup> Survey of the data found in the Nursing courses' PPPs;*

*3<sup>rd</sup> Search for identification of the curricular components that approach the theme of Bioethics, observing the identification name, the semester in which the discipline is offered, the workload and the content definitions.*

## Results

In the first stage of the work, 58 Federal Universities were located and selected as a sample, 16 of them (27%) were in agreement with inclusion the criteria mentioned above. They were organized according to their regions, as Table 1 indicates.

**Table 1.** Brazilian federal universities that offer the Nursing course and have their PPP available online

Northeast Region
Federal University of Alagoas – Ufal
Federal University of Bahia – Ufba
Federal University of Ceará – UFC
1. Federal University of Recôncavo da Bahia – UFRB
Federal University of Pernambuco – UFPE
Federal University of Piauí – UFPI
Midwest Region
Federal University of Brasília – UnB
Federal University of Goiás – UFG
Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul – UFMS
Southeast Region
Federal University of Espírito Santo – Ufes
Federal University Fluminense – UFF
Federal University of Minas Gerais – UFMG

Southeast Region
Federal University of de São Carlos – UFSCar
Federal University of Uberlândia – UFU
University of Rio de Janeiro – UniRio
Federal University of Rio de Janeiro – UFRJ

The second and third stages of the research were carried out through a survey of data found in the Nursing Courses' PPPs and the search for identification of the curricular components that approach the theme of bioethics. For this, we observed the identification name of the curricular component, the semester in which the subject is offered, the workload and the content definitions. The results obtained in these stages are presented in Table 2, in which the curricular components, the semester in which this discipline is offered and their workloads are identified. The year of the PPP's elaboration is also identified, when available.

**Table 2.** Identification of the curricular component available on the PPP online, its workloads and semester

Northeast Region	Curricular component identification	PPP Year	Semester	WL
UFAL	Nursing, Health and Society II	2007	2 <sup>nd</sup>	240
UFBA	Ethics and Bioethics I	2009	2 <sup>nd</sup>	34
	Seminars of Ethics and Bioethics I	--	5 <sup>th</sup>	17
	Seminars of Ethics and Bioethics II	--	8 <sup>th</sup>	17
UFC	Ethics	2004	1 <sup>st</sup>	32
	Ethics and Legislation in Nursing		5 <sup>th</sup>	64
UFRB	Bioethics and the Exercise of Nursing	Not identified	3 <sup>rd</sup>	68
UFPE	Legislation of Nursing Ethics and Bioethics I	2010	1 <sup>st</sup>	30
	Legislation of Nursing Ethics and Bioethics II	--	(elective)	15
UFPI	Bioethics, Ethics and Legislation for Nursing	Not identified	5 <sup>th</sup>	45
Midwest Region	Curricular component identification	PPP Year	Semester	WL
UnB	Ethics, Bioethics and Legislation	2008	5 <sup>th</sup>	04 CIC
UFG	Ethics and the Exercise of Nursing	Not identified	7 <sup>th</sup>	40
UFMS	Thematic Unit: 1.2 – The Ethics in the Nurse's Professional Performance	2004	1 <sup>st</sup> S E P	68
Southeast Region	Curricular component identification	PPP Year	Semester	WL
UFES	Introduction of the Nursing context:	2010		
	Ethics	--	1 <sup>st</sup>	30
	Legislation and Deontology	--	1 <sup>st</sup>	30
UFF	Work Relations in Health: Ethics, Bioethics and Professional Legislation	2005	3 <sup>rd</sup>	60
UFMG	Bioethics	2006	Optional	45
	Ethics and Culture	--	Optional	15

Southeast Region	Curricular component identification	PPP Year	Semester	WL
UFSCar	Nucleus: Historical, Ethical and Legal Bases of Nursing	2004	1 <sup>st</sup>	60
UFU	Ethics and Philosophical Anthropology	2010	1 <sup>st</sup>	45
UNIRIO	Special Topics of Bioethics in Nursing	2003	Optional	30
UFRJ	Professional Ethics	2006	6 <sup>th</sup>	15
	Deontology in Nursing	--	6 <sup>th</sup>	15

Source: Political Pedagogical Projects (PPP) of Nursing course of federal universities. Jequié/BA.

Analyzing the nursing courses' PPP, we identified that the bioethics thematic approach permeates five axis of discussion in the content definitions researched: 1) bioethics; 2) ethics; 3) nursing legislation; 4) the exercise of nursing and; 5) deontology. As bioethics was identified in eight federal universities as a curricular component or specific theme, this means saying that 50% of the total selected sample includes the study of bioethics in the curricular schedule.

Among the eight universities that do not have the Bioethics discipline or refer directly to this field, seven of them, which is equivalent to 43,75% of the total selected sample, approach correlated themes: 1) ethics; 2) nursing legislation; 3) nursing exercise and; 4) deontology. Only one university, which is equivalent to 6,25% of the total sample, does not approach the theme, neither directly nor indirectly. It is worth pointing out that, during the study, it was observed that, among the selected institutions, only the Nursing course of UFMG approaches bioethics in an exclusive way as a curricular component, even though it is offered as an optional subject, and the other seven offer it as a subject matter for ten courses.

## Discussion

Analyzing the content definitions of the Bioethics discipline or theme in the Nursing courses' PPPs of Federal Universities, it was noticed that, in these institutions, field study incorporates the conceptualization, origin, characteristic, principle and applicability of nursing and also bioethical themes and dilemmas related to exercising this profession. The analysis of bioethics' insertion in the curricular proposals of 50% of the nursing courses seems to indicate the need for this reflection in teaching, appreciating its thematic singularity and the pertinence of this reflection's inclusion in social and professional qualification.

The insertion of ethics besides bioethics in the integrated nursing curriculum brings relevant contributions for teaching this area. This conclusion may be inferred from the fact that 93,75% of the courses dedicate at least semester to studies of this kind. Such inclusion enable the creation of ethical discussion and reflection moments during the whole process of curricular construction, allowing a new teaching model that values the decision making process in practical situations of care in nursing. Such model confronts the traditional model of teaching, and it ends up, thus, limiting the ethical knowledge to an incipient theoretical and deontological basis<sup>9</sup>, which leaves uncovered the essential aspects of the professional life related to the ethical dimension.

Frequently, the dilemmatic issues in health involve a reflection about life and death. Even though the professional decisions related to such questions are guided by technical impositions, its repercussion within the professionals is strongly influenced by their moral values, their familiar education and their religious conviction<sup>2</sup>. As a result of this background, during the graduation course, the nursing student will probably experience conflicting situations, about which they are not ready to have an opinion. This type of situation, that becomes frequent in some cases or even daily in their work life, may produce intense psychic and moral suffering in their professional future.

In order to face this adverse circumstance, it is important that the graduate understands, in first place, that the practical health problems come, to a great extent, from the social and economic disparities that mark the Brazilian society, which was produced in the middle of social-historical-cultural diversities. This perspective, stimulated in the bioethical reflection, helps the future professional understanding the social determining factors of the health-sickness process, making it possible for them to work respectfully with the users' cultural and social differences. They will also be able to understand that discussing the exercise of nursing under the

scope of ethics and bioethics stimulates their capacity of acting consciously, in a critical and pondered way<sup>8</sup>, allowing an aware and reflective professional performance, based on the principles of citizenship. For this reason, in nursing graduation courses, ethics and bioethics are fundamental curricular components, because they provide this type of reflection, related to the intention of making one think<sup>6</sup>.

If ethics and bioethics are found to be so important for the daily professional practice, their value grows even more when we consider the evolution of science and the advent of new technologies that bring never seen before ethical and bioethical dilemmas, for which, most of the times, the nurse was not prepared for during their academic education. This situation reinforces the need for teaching bioethics and seeking new ways of strengthening the nurses' professional qualification, with the intention of making them feel capable of reflecting about the proper professional performance, competence, commitment and responsibility. The impasses that come from new technologies require not only the professionals' technical perfecting, but also reveal the importance of their ethical qualification.

The study of Mascarenhas and Santa Rosa, in 2010, has a similar reality to this research's. The study mentioned observed that the teaching of ethics is directed to the approach of deontology in the professional exercise. The study also found the inclusion of ethical and bioethical fundamentals in the curricular proposals, but in a smaller proportion. If the knowledge of ethical rules is indispensable for the fully qualified professional exercise, the ethical and bioethical reflection have revealed as being essential for the qualification of nurses who are capable of dealing with daily conflicts; professionals that have pertinent theoretical basis for finding decisions for the constant ethical dilemmas that they face<sup>12</sup>.

Regarding the statement above, it is also indispensable to analyze in which academic semester the discipline of bioethics is taught for each one of the courses, as well as their workload, which allows imagining the density of content administered. Analyzing comparatively the results of columns 4 and 5 of table 2, it can be noticed that, among the teaching institutions that approach the bioethical theme in their curricular matrix, four of them offered the discipline in the initial semesters: one curriculum places it in the first semester, one in the second and two in the third semester. One institution presents the discipline at the end of the course, in the eighth semester. It was also observed that, in three of the institutions, the theme

of bioethics is presented as an optional discipline and in only one, as elective.

It is worth mentioning that, among the teaching institutions surveyed, Ufba is highlighted for presenting the theme in more than one semester, which allows the students to experience the bioethical reflection under different perspectives during their qualification. But this emphasis is given to bioethics by institution is not a rule, because it can be noticed that, in some cases, the discipline is optional, which means that the study of this medicine is not mandatory for the student. Such contingency, that limits the student's professional qualification, contributes to the non-existence of a minimum standardization among the different courses and institutions, regarding the professional ethical qualification. This flaw, that certainly brings adverse effects to individual qualification, is reflected in the collective dimension since it hampers the consolidation of qualified personnel staffs for ethical reflection in the professional life, as the Universal Health System (SUS) structure requires.

This conclusion can surmise that it is of utter importance that the bioethical reflection is offered to the students during their studies in all of the Nursing graduation courses, such curricular implementation should serve as a claim for the professors in their departments, educational institutions, as well as the Ministry of Education (MEC). It is also highlighted that, for an optimization of this bioethical reflection by the students, the discipline must be presented since the first semester of graduation, preferably being extended and deepened throughout the course. That is, the discipline will be optimized if it is administered continuously, starting before the beginning of field practices, in order to assure that the students are better prepared to face the dilemmas experienced in the professional practice.

It is important to highlight, still, that the study has faced an additional difficulty, regarding the profile evaluation of the person who teaches this bioethical discipline or theme, whose information are not available in the online version of the PPPs. Thus, it was possible to know the degree of the professor's academic qualification: if they have a masters or a doctoral in ethics and/or bioethics, which prevents the analytical deepening of the outcomes of the Bioethical discipline's offer in the PPPs. It is considered relevant emphasizing the absence of this information, once the professor's professional qualification is a factor of utmost im-



portance for the discipline's content definition and the way this content is administered.

Directly related to this issue, it is still important to highlight that the information made available in the online PPPs may not reflect literally the educational reality experienced in the classroom. This difference, that may be partially explained by obstructions in the necessary semester update of the PPPs by the institutions, comes additionally from the fact that the proposal of the formal curriculum is taken as a guide, in the general terms, focused on orienting the discipline's practice. In this sense, it is paramount to consider that the educational practice per se implies adaptations in each semester's disciplines, whether it is due to being taught by different professors or, especially, due to the incorporation of new academic papers that have increased the knowledge about the subject. Thus, it is necessary to highlight that, in fact, the university courses go through constant adaptations, even though these adaptations are not registered in the disciplines' curriculum.

Finally, it is necessary to consider that, if these adaptations and adjustments in the way of teaching the discipline or even in its content, in relation to what is presented in the PPP, compete in order to diminish the comprehensiveness of the reflections generated by an online survey, as this research's undertaking, it does not necessarily mean that the courses are inferior to the disclosed curriculum. Even though this is a possibility, it is more likely that these differences reflect the dialectic movement between the formal and informal, indispensable to efficient education. It may be predicted that they indicate tensions and contradictions between the prescribed and the experienced; between the regulation and emancipation, which are in the basis of quality professional qualification, especially when they are ethical and bioethical issues related to health. That is, on one hand, the official curriculum presents several objectives that should be achieved by the educational process. On the other hand, daily life imposes other situations that demand a dynamic pedagogical practice, capable of meeting these needs<sup>13</sup>.

## Final Remarks

This study observed that the presence of the Bioethics discipline or theme is approached directly in 50% of the surveyed universities. It is noticed, however, that bioethics is still taught as a complementary theme to other disciplines and not as a focal point of the teaching-learning process in the Nursing bachelors. From this, we concluded that the insertion of bioethics in the educational context of the nursing courses as an autonomous discipline is necessary. It is essential to establish spaces for the bioethical discussion about the ethical conflicts that involve the professional, considering, especially, the need for stimulating the reflection and dialogue when facing those dilemmatic situations which are not only based on the profession's inherent values, that are naturally normative, but approach the individual's most intimate dimension, their beliefs and moralities<sup>2</sup>.

The importance in enhancing the qualification of health workers in the specialized technical dimension, ethical-political, communicational and of personal interrelations for their participation as a whole in work world is the biggest challenge for occupying space through Nursing<sup>11</sup>. Due to the accelerated transformations which we all have been living, which the health professionals are subjected to, we are all in favor of inclusion and strengthening of in the curricular schedule of a bioethics that is guided by respects and incentive to individual freedom in decision making, with principles of solidarity, justice, equity and responsibility, reinforcing the need to protect the most disadvantaged and fragile, vulnerable or infringed<sup>1</sup>.

Therefore, it is paramount that the humanistic approach is intensified in the nursing courses, appreciating interdisciplinarity and the use of bioethics as a mandatory curricular component, due to its significant relevance in assistance and teaching. This way, students will become active, critical and scientifically prepared professionals, with the capacity of relating theory and practice in their daily activities, leading to the development of critical views of health practices in our country.

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#### Authors' participation

José Carlos Filho, Flávia Souza and Sílvia Silva designed and developed the research, besides writing the article. Sérgio Yarid e Edite Sena oriented the work's elaboration.

