

Impacts of COVID-19 on nursing care in the head and neck oncology outpatient clinic



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Lucimere Maria dos Santos

Nurse President of the INCA Skin Care Commission
Ph.D. in Health Care Sciences from EEAAC/UFF
Master's Degree from the Professional Master's Program in Care Nursing at UFF
Post-graduation lato Sensu in Dermatological Nursing
Post-graduation lato Sensu in Oncology Nursing
Post-graduation lato Sensu in Intensive Care
White belt in Lean Six Sigma and Lean Healthcare
Yellow belt in Lean Six Sigma
Green Belt in Lean Six Sigma and Lean Healthcare
LATTES: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/7194755422370640>
E-mail: lucimereuff@gmail.com

Marcia Santos

Nurse Master in health and technology in the hospital space. National Cancer Institute, Brazil.

Teresa Cristina Silva Palermo

Nurse Specialist in Oncology, National Cancer Institute, Brazil.

Luciana Nogueira dos Santos

Biologist Specialist in Molecular Biology. National Cancer Institute, Brazil.

Cristiane dos Santos Mendonça da Silva

Nurse Specialist in Oncology. National Cancer Institute, Brazil.

Aureonice Marinho

Postgraduate Phonodiologist in Psychomotricity. National Cancer Institute, Brazil.

Aline Peragene

Nurse Specialist in Oncology. National Cancer Institute, Brazil.

Julia Meireles da Costa Titulação

Nursing technique. National Cancer Institute, Brazil.

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the impacts of COVID-19 on the care of cancer patients in the head and neck surgery outpatient clinic, through the procedures performed in the years 2019, 2020, and 2021. Method: Qualitative, descriptive study about the procedures performed by the nursing team in a head and neck surgery outpatient clinic. Data were collected from January 2019 to December 2021 and computed in an Excel spreadsheet. Results: They showed a negative disparity in the quantity of patient care in the head and neck surgery outpatient clinic in 2019 compared to 2020, in which there was a decrease of 33%. Comparing the results of the year 2019 with 2021 we noticed a drop of 25%. However, when compared to the year 2020 to 2021, there was an increase of 12%. In the number of procedures performed in 2020, there was a decrease of 31% compared to 2019, and, compared to 2021, there was a decrease of 26%, but in the year 2020 to 2021, there was an increase of 13%. Conclusion: The COVID-19 pandemic generated a strong impact on the care provided to patients of the head and neck surgery outpatient clinic, leading to a reduction in the care and provision of nursing care to this clientele, but at the beginning of the pandemic scenario the institutions had to redesign the care protocols to cope with the current situation of the country and the world, thus promoting safer and more efficient assistance.

Keywords: Nursing Care, Head and neck cancer, Covid-19.

1 INTRODUCTION

The incidence and mortality from cancer have been increasing worldwide, becoming the main public health problem, partly due to aging, population growth, as well as the change in the distribution and prevalence of cancer risk factors, especially those associated with socioeconomic development (Lagergren et al., 2016).

According to the National Cancer Institute (INCA), for each year of the 2020/2022 triennium, Brazil is expected to register 624,000 new cases of cancer. Among the cases of cancer, tumors in the

Head and Neck (PC) region have a high incidence and high mortality. In the region of the oral cavity will be 11,180 cases in men and 4,010 in women, while thyroid cancer will be 1,830 new cases in men and 11,950 in women (Brazil, 2019).

Regarding the cases of laryngeal cancer expected in Brazil, it will be 6,470 in men and 1,180 in women. The most frequent histological type is squamous cell carcinoma (SCC), which appears in more than 90% of cases (Brasil, 2019).

Surgery to remove the tumor lesion of the head and neck cancer patient, as well as tracheostomy are the most common procedures among the treatment modalities discussed by medical professionals due to respiratory complications arising from tumor progression, compromising self-image and their participation in social life (Mota et al., 2021).

The care developed by the nursing team in the outpatient clinic of surgery of the head and neck region is done in an individual and specialized way, valuing the social, economic, and cultural contexts, allied to the process of health promotion that must happen in an integrated way with the individuals involved in this scenario, but it suffered interference about access to these actions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Infectious disease caused by the SARS-COV-2 coronavirus (WHO, 2020).

Thus, it was possible to perceive that the pandemic caused a significant reduction in the number of surgeries for the treatment of cancer, the nursing procedures performed, and the number of visitors and companions, in addition to the effective reduction of professionals due to SARS-COV-2 contamination, as well as the suspension of meetings and meetings between patients, families, and professionals, which are extremely relevant for treatment efficiency, in the orientation for self-care, in the promotion and recovery of health and self-esteem of PC patients (Araújo et al., 2020).

The current pandemic has required healthcare professionals dedicated to cancer treatment to redesign cancer care, permanently updating the practice of care to promote safe and effective care, thereby mitigating the potential negative effects of COVID-19 infection on patients undergoing treatment (Ramos, 2020).

In this context, chronic disease conditions have required individuals to use long-term treatment, use strategies for home care, and restructure lifestyles as a way of taking care of themselves. Thus, the nursing care provided to head and neck patients is conceived as a complex and impactful experience, capable of interfering with the care and interaction between professional and patient.

In addition to the technical and emotional aspects, nursing exercises its capacity to overcome in carrying out the care processes for the patient treated at the PC surgery outpatient clinic, through one of the attributes most dear to this professional: the recognition of the human condition marked by the fortuity of life in an awareness of the constituent singularity of every individual (Santos, Santos & Silva, 2016).

Thus, this study aims to analyze the impacts of COVID-19 on the care of cancer patients in the head and neck surgery outpatient clinic, through the procedures performed in the years 2019, 2020, and 2021.

2 METHODOLOGY

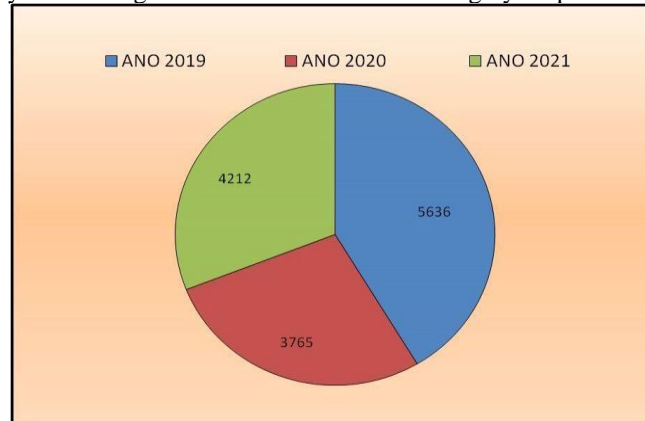
This is a descriptive study with a qualitative approach to the procedures performed by the nursing team in a head and neck surgery outpatient clinic of a Federal Hospital, located in the city of Rio de Janeiro/RJ. The primary data were collected from January 2019 to December 2021 and took place through documentary research using an instrument established by the institution in all outpatient clinics, where the results are entered daily by the nursing team. These data come from the nursing procedures book. The content analysis method was used to organize the data and analyze the results obtained. The data were computed in an Excel spreadsheet (Bardin, 2004).

3 FINDINGS

The results presented demonstrate the consequences of infections from COVID-19, affecting patients being treated for cancer more severely than others. As a result, some types of scheduled clinical and surgical treatments at the facility have been canceled or postponed due to the prioritization of hospital beds for the treatment of COVID-19 patients. This situation directly affected the treatment and care of patients with head and neck cancer, who needed first-time consultations to draw up the treatment plan as early as possible or subsequent consultations for continuity of care, since it is a type of cancer of rapid evolution.

The results shown in the following graph show a negative disparity in the number of patient visits in the head and neck surgery outpatient clinic in 2019 compared to 2020, a year in which there was a decrease of 33%. Comparing the results of the year 2019 with 2021, a drop of 25% was noticed. However, when compared to the year 2020 to 2021, in the services provided to this clientele, an increase of 12% was noted.

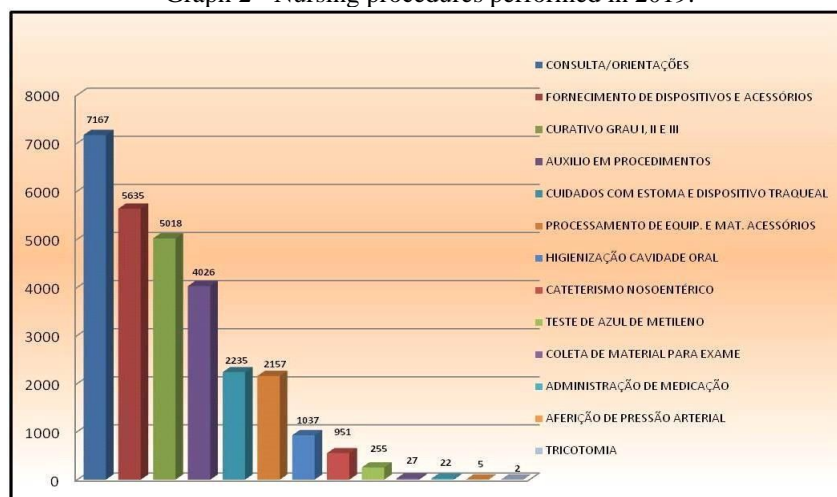
Graph 1 - Patients are seen by the nursing team at the head and neck surgery outpatient clinic in 2019, 2020, and 2021.



Source: INCA - HC1.

In the graph above it is noticed that in the year 2020, there was a significant drop in nursing care in the outpatient clinic under discussion, but in the year 2021, this difference was reduced.

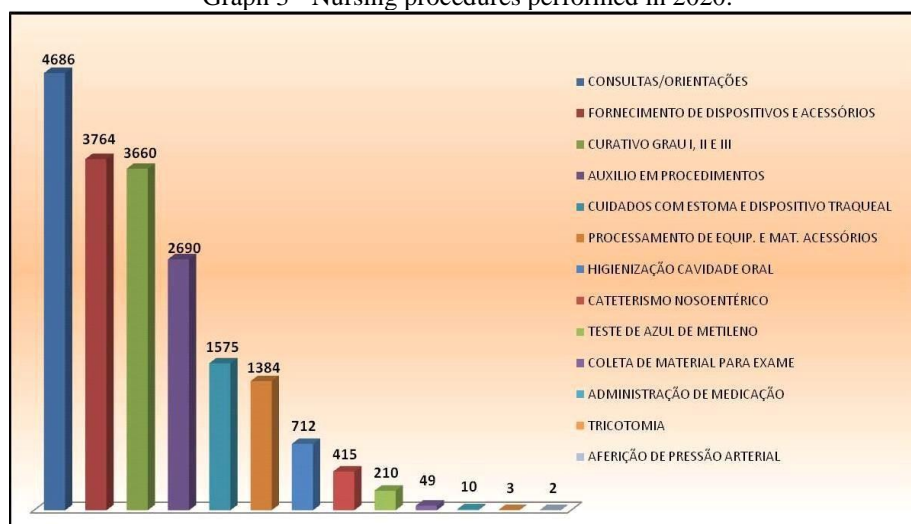
Graph 2 - Nursing procedures performed in 2019.



Source: INCA - HC1.

Graph 2 presents the most common procedures performed by the nursing team in 2019, with emphasis on consultations and orientations; the provision of devices and accessories for continuity of care at home, and the performance of dressings. It is important to highlight that in this last procedure, according to COFEN (2018), the nurse is the professional who coordinates and supervises the nursing team, as well as evaluates, prescribes, and performs care for patients with all types of wounds, regardless of the degree of tissue involvement. In addition, it participates in the choice of materials, equipment, and medicines for prevention and care.

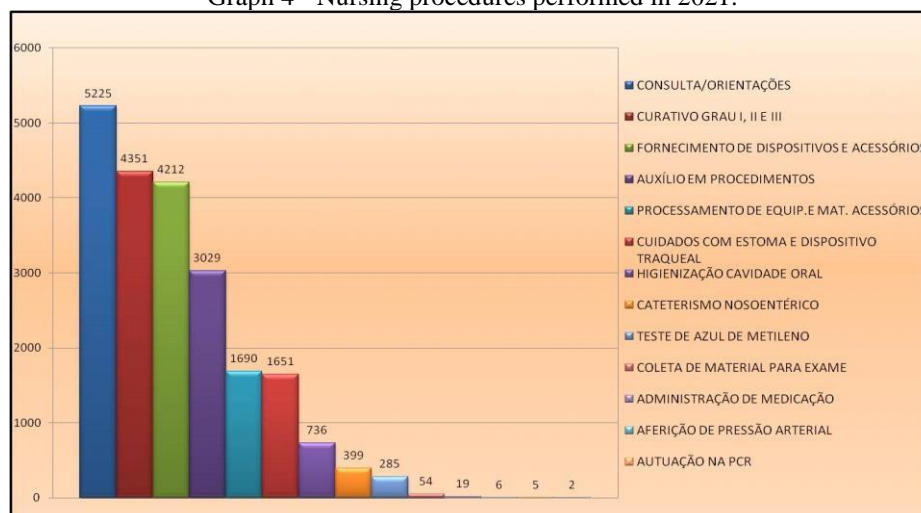
Graph 3 - Nursing procedures performed in 2020.



Source: INCA - HC1.

According to Graph 3, it is noticed that in 2020 there was no change regarding the procedures performed by nursing. However, when observing the quantity of the procedures performed, there is a drop in numbers, quite significant, which corroborates the decline in the number of patients attended. Thus, it is possible to notice that the guidelines remained in the first place since this procedure continued to happen in person to the patients when they were discharged from the hospital and via telephone when requested.

Graph 4 - Nursing procedures performed in 2021.

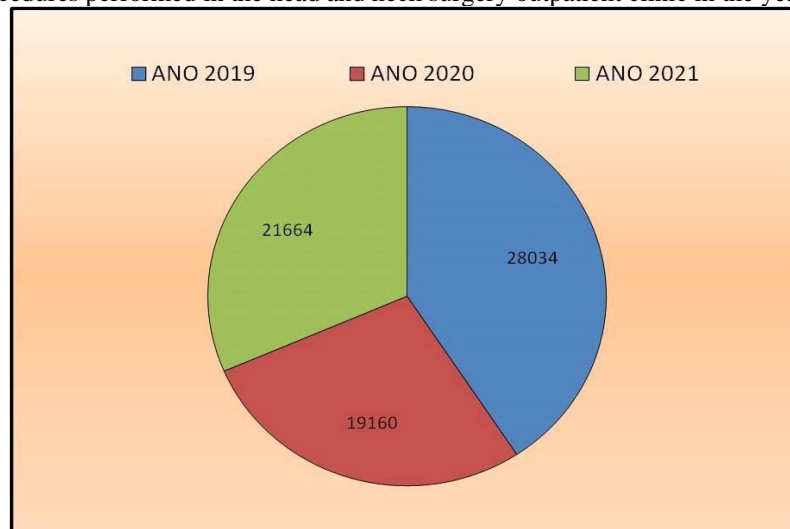


Source: INCA - HC1.

In Graph 4, it is noticed that there was a change in the ranking of procedures performed by the nursing team in the year 2019 and 2020, where the performance of dressings appears in second place. This result is justified by the adaptation and increase of the knowledge of the managers and the nursing team in the quality of the strategies implemented for the prevention of COVID-19, enabling the

increase of medical and nursing consultations, as well as the entry of companions in the institution, since the presence of the caregiver/family member with the patient, in the nursing consultations, provides better conditions for home care.

Graph 5 - Nursing procedures performed in the head and neck surgery outpatient clinic in the year 2019, 2020, and 2021.



Source: INCA - HC1.

About the number of procedures performed in 2020 (Graph 5), it was possible to observe that there was a decrease of 31% in 2019 and, compared to 2021, there was a decrease of 26%, but comparing the year from 2020 to 2021, there was an increase of 13%.

4 DISCUSSION

The experience of 20 years of one of the authors, the nurse responsible for the outpatient clinic for the care of patients with head and neck cancer, in a Federal Public Hospital, a reference in oncology in Rio de Janeiro, reports the high demand for the specific care of the nursing team and the need to offer comprehensive care in all phases of oncological care, that is, from confirmation of the diagnosis to rehabilitation.

The nursing actions provided to patients in this outpatient clinic are numerous, according to the results presented in this study, but some are more prevalent, regardless of the period before or after COVID-19, such as orientations, provision of devices and accessories for the continuity of care at home and the care of tumor and surgical wounds, respiratory stomas, and tracheostomy cannula changes.

The nursing team, as well as the multidisciplinary team, acts in the care of patients in a unique and qualified way, but the pandemic has brought difficulties to the development of nursing activities for the patient, both due to the concern of the patient to be in an environment susceptible to contamination by COVID-19, and to the professionals in the approach of the patient and family in the

referred outpatient clinic.

Due to the reduction in the scheduling of patients for first and subsequent appointments, as shown in Graph 1, clinical and surgical treatments were compromised due to the worsening of COVID-19 in the year 2020, also reflecting on nursing care. The patients were not able to access radiotherapy and chemotherapy sessions. According to Denys et al. (2020), in a study conducted with cancer patients, 43% of these reported having their treatment impacted by the pandemic. However, in 2021, medical and nursing consultations gradually returned to normality, because as in other health institutions, the hospital was improving in the strategies for implementing safety measures to cope with the pandemic.

Treatment for head and neck cancer derives from first-time consultations, some types of therapy such as surgery and scheduled radiotherapies were canceled or postponed due to the prioritization of hospital beds and professionals for those who were seriously ill with COVID-19 infection, as scientific literature has shown that this infection affects patients undergoing cancer treatment more severely (Araújo et al., 2020).

The care of the nursing team with the head and neck cancer patient is quite complex due to the degree of complication related to the treatment, and the clinical conditions, in addition to the cognitive difficulties perceived during the orientations provided during the nursing consultation or at the time of the performance of the procedures by the technicians.

Among the actions developed by the nursing team, it was possible to perceive in the results that the orientations provided to patients and companions emerged in the first place in all years, regardless of the pandemic situation in the country, because this care is necessary and extremely relevant in this type of clientele, to avoid interurrences, such as infections in the surgical sites, myiasis infestations in the respiratory stoma or tumor wound, as well as to promote and encourage the patient to develop self-care (Origa & Costa, 2020).

Nursing is one of the professions in the health area whose essence and specificity highlight the care of the human being, individually, in the family or the community, developing distinct activities. It is responsible for the comfort, welcoming, and well-being of patients, either by providing care or by coordinating other sectors for the provision of care and promoting patients' autonomy (Valença et al., 2016).

The performance of procedures, according to the attributions of each component of the nursing team, contributes to an interaction between the professionals, as well as a correct understanding of the roles that each one performs in the institution, cooperating so that the activities performed to result in a comprehensive and quality nursing care provided to clients.

In coping with a diagnosis of cancer and especially in the head and neck region, the patient

responds individually to reactions such as fear, anxiety, sadness, revolt at the image alteration caused by the tumor lesion and the use of the tracheostomy cannula, which prevents him from expressing himself verbally and relationally socially.

Thus, the challenge of nursing care provided to PC patients lies in their various physical and psychosocial demands, which need to be met using different forms of communication and counseling, as well as theoretical and practical knowledge that involves care (Cruz et al., 2016).

Thus, it is possible to affirm that the pandemic scenario has provided damage to the quality of life of patients with head and neck cancer and that the greatest impact occurred in the biological dimension, as a result of the increased risk of complications associated with COVID-19, such as difficulty in accessing treatment (Corrêa et al., 2020).

The impediment of entry into the Institution of the patient with a companion made communication more difficult and inefficient, since the information provided to him, for the care of the hygiene of the cannulas, cleaning of the respiratory stomas, as well as the care of the tumor lesions or operative wounds, it is necessary to be provided to the maximum of people involved in the context of care with the PC patient, for understanding that this presents difficulties to manage the entire process of care related to pathology (INCA, 2020).

PC patients present communication difficulties that may occur before or after surgery, such as fear of performing hygiene care of the stomas, manipulation of the tracheostomy cannula, and maintaining body hygiene that corroborates the concepts and postulates of Dorothea Orem on the construction of knowledge in the field of theoretical and philosophical bases of nursing, as a strong guide for its practice, concerning self-care needs and health promotion through educational interventions (Santos & Mota, 2021).

According to Maslow's theory, when the individual achieves, either totally or partially, his needs, he can achieve higher levels of psychological health, which is imbricated with the way a being reacts to the demands, challenges, and changes of life and also with the way he harmonizes his ideas and emotions (Corrêa et al., 2020).

Thus, it is understood that the nurse should act to guide the actions developed with the patient, including the caregiver/family, who should be welcomed and included in the actions developed with the individual, actively participating in the entire phase of treatment, as well as the prevention of injuries in the home environment, because the treatment or even the pathology makes the communication process with the nursing team more exhaustive, which during the pandemic has become more difficult and ineffective.

Teamwork understood as a technical body, but also as a social group, favors the emergence of coping and support strategies for professional performance and source of problem-solving (Santos et

al., 2016).

The technical procedures reported by the nursing team in individuals with tumors in the head and neck region present us with an understanding of the nurse-individual relationship before, during, and after hospital discharge, and the findings should be considered by nurses who provide information for home care.

In this way, ensuring continuity of treatment for patients in the head and neck surgery outpatient clinic as well as throughout the institution has become a priority and a challenge in the course of the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic, many technical and practical recommendations have been elaborated, apprehended and implemented (Araujo et al., 2020).

5 CONCLUSION

In 2020, the period of the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, health institutions, having to get used to the new form of patient care, had to develop and implement strategies to adapt care to them, suspending the circulation of companions, causing great difficulty to promote nursing care related to guidelines for the continuity of care at home, only for the patient, since in this context, the involvement of the caregiver/family member to this clientele is of paramount importance.

The strategies also permeated to protect the professionals from contamination by the virus, even so, there was a high rate of absenteeism in the care scenario, impairing the quality of the services provided.

The nursing team, for being closer and longer with the patient and their families and being responsible for providing care in general, needs to be in good physical and psychological condition to perceive patients and provide quality care, understanding them in all their needs and dimensions, during the illness process.

Care guidelines are considered essential in the prevention, promotion, and rehabilitation of the client's health. The challenge of nursing care provided to this population lies in its various physical and psychosocial demands, which need to be met through different forms of communication and counseling, as well as specialized theoretical and practical knowledge involving care.

Thus, it is concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic has generated a strong impact on the care provided to patients of the head and neck surgery outpatient clinic, leading to a reduction in care and the provision of nursing care.

Thus, it is suggested that further studies on the theme be carried out to make known the actions developed by the nursing team in the oncological scenario of other institutions.

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