

## Editorial – Nursing Care in Times of Epidemics and Pandemics. Historical and Ethical Issues

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### 1 Introduction

Applauded as “silent heroes” on balconies at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, nurses in various European countries spoke out as the pandemic progressed to highlight their precarious working conditions and their importance in combating the pandemic. A number of nursing ethics problems arose from the lack of sufficiently qualified nursing staff in intensive care, the lack of material equipment in hospitals and the inadequate working conditions in long-term care: How can a fair distribution of resources be ensured under pandemic conditions? How do nursing professionals deal with the fact that they were unable to meet the demands for professional and, in this sense, good nursing care? (The keywords “missed nursing care” and “moral distress” may be mentioned here.) How can nursing care do justice to vulnerable and elderly people under pandemic conditions (and, in the future, also in the event of epidemically occurring, dangerous infectious diseases), when their liberties must be restricted for their own protection?

The current pandemic experience has rekindled interest in epidemic history. Revisiting historical research on pandemics and epidemics, one thing in particular stands out: good nursing care is crucial for the survival and recovery of infectious patients whose disease cannot be treated causally. Even though bacterial infectious diseases such as cholera, tuberculosis and typhoid fever have been easily treatable with antibiotics since the 1940s, it is still true today that, for pandemics caused by viruses, professional nursing care plays a key role in the course of the disease and in the prognosis of patients. Unlike the importance of nursing in pandemic control, the role of nurses and their daily work in past pandemics and epidemics has been little studied.

An epidemic history that puts nursing and nurses at the centre of interest examines not only concrete nursing practices but also the knowledge that was necessary to prevent the spread of dangerous infectious diseases. Knowledge of hygiene can still be considered a core competence of nurses today, and it was also evident in the current pandemic.

The fourth issue of the European Journal for Nursing History and Ethics focusses on how nurses have dealt with epidemics and endemic diseases in specific – historical as well as current – political and social settings. The contributions in the themed section range from the experiences of Bulgarian nurses in the typhoid epidemic of the 1930s, discussed by Kristina Popova, to the fight against epidemics in immigration camps for Holocaust survivors, analysed by Dorit Weiss and Hava Golander, to the most recent experiences in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The historical contributions are complemented in the open section by an article by Hall et al. on the transfer of the Danish deaconess model to the Faroe Islands.

The cover of this issue already refers to the mask as an iconographic object of the COVID-19 pandemic. The photo is from the first wave of the pandemic in Lombardy, Italy, and is part of

a collection of narratives about everyday life during the pandemic shared by nurses and midwives across Europe in 2020.<sup>1</sup> The question of how this new materiality of “COVIDwear” has changed nursing practice is explored by Benoît Majerus using the example of Luxembourg. Sabine Wöhlke and Gisela Ruwe examine the specific experiences of nursing students in the hospital setting during the initial period of the pandemic, which was characterised by a high degree of uncertainty. Astrid Eich-Krohme et al. turn to the nursing home setting, analysing the impact of COVID-19 regulations on the relationship between nurses and residents in nursing homes in Germany.

The historical and ethical contributions to this special issue have emerged in light of the researchers' direct experience with the COVID-19 pandemic. In the future, there will probably be a large number of historical studies on this pandemic in which the contribution of nurses can also be addressed, as a large number of documents have been collected that present the experiences of nurses in their own voices.

## Bibliography

European Association for the History of Nursing, Experiences of Coronavirus Covid-19, <http://eahn.net/covid-19-nurses/>, accessed December 15, 2022.

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<sup>1</sup> European Association for the History of Nursing 2020.