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MANAGEMENT BY OBJECTIVES IN REHABILITATION NURSING: CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR WORK PROCESSES

*GESTÃO POR OBJETIVOS NA ENFERMAGEM DE REABILITAÇÃO:
DESAFIOS E IMPLICAÇÕES PARA OS PROCESSOS DE TRABALHO*

*GESTIÓN POR OBJETIVOS EN ENFERMERÍA DE REHABILITACIÓN:
DESAÍOS E IMPLICACIONES PARA LOS PROCESOS DE TRABAJO*

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RESUMO

Introdução: A definição de objetivos e metas constitui um elemento central na organização dos processos de trabalho em enfermagem de reabilitação, orientando o planeamento, a tomada de decisão e a avaliação da qualidade dos cuidados.

Objetivos: Analisar criticamente como a definição de objetivos e metas condiciona os processos de trabalho dos enfermeiros de reabilitação e propor recomendações para a prática profissional.

Metodologia: Reflexão fundamentada numa revisão narrativa da literatura científica, em documentos normativos da Ordem dos Enfermeiros e na experiência clínica dos autores.

Reflexão: A definição de objetivos e metas influencia três domínios interdependentes dos processos de trabalho: a prestação e gestão dos cuidados, a avaliação de desempenho profissional e os processos de formação contínua. Identificaram-se benefícios associados à melhoria da eficácia, qualidade e segurança dos cuidados, bem como desafios relacionados com metas irrealistas, foco excessivo em indicadores quantitativos e limitada integração das dimensões psicossociais e subjetivas da reabilitação.

Conclusão: A definição reflexiva, colaborativa e centrada na pessoa de objetivos e metas constitui um instrumento estruturante dos processos de trabalho dos enfermeiros de reabilitação, contribuindo para a excelência clínica, o desenvolvimento profissional e a sustentabilidade dos serviços de saúde. Recomenda-se a utilização de indicadores sensíveis à reabilitação e o fortalecimento de competências em planeamento, comunicação e avaliação.

Descritores: Enfermagem em Reabilitação; Qualidade da Assistência à Saúde; Processo de Trabalho em Saúde; Gestão em saúde; Objetivos; Indicadores de Qualidade em Assistência à Saúde

ABSTRACT

Introduction: The definition of aims constitutes a central element in the organization of work processes in rehabilitation nursing, guiding planning, decision-making, and the evaluation of care quality.

Aim: To critically analyze how the definition of objectives and goals conditions the work processes of rehabilitation nurses and to propose recommendations for professional practice.

Methodology: Reflection based on a narrative review of the scientific literature, normative documents from the Ordem dos Enfermeiros, and the authors' clinical experience.

Reflection: The definition of objectives and goals influences three interdependent domains of work processes: care delivery and management, professional performance evaluation, and continuous education processes. Benefits were identified in terms of improved effectiveness, quality, and safety of care, as well as challenges related to unrealistic goals, excessive focus on quantitative indicators,

and limited integration of psychosocial and subjective dimensions of rehabilitation.

Conclusion: The reflective, collaborative, and person-centered definition of objectives and goals constitutes a structuring instrument of rehabilitation nurses' work processes, contributing to clinical excellence, professional development, and the sustainability of health services. The use of rehabilitation-sensitive indicators and the strengthening of competencies in planning, communication, and evaluation are recommended.

Descriptors: Rehabilitation Nursing; Quality of Health Care; Healthcare Work Process; Health Management; Goals; Quality Indicators, Health Care

RESUMEN

Introducción: La definición de objetivos y metas constituye un elemento central en la organización de los procesos de trabajo en enfermería de rehabilitación, orientando la planificación, la toma de decisiones y la evaluación de la calidad de los cuidados.

Objetivos: Analizar críticamente cómo la definición de objetivos y metas condiciona los procesos de trabajo de los enfermeros de rehabilitación y proponer recomendaciones para la práctica profesional.

Metodología: Reflexión fundamentada en una revisión narrativa de la literatura científica, en documentos normativos de la Ordem dos Enfermeiros y en la experiencia clínica de los autores.

Reflexión: La definición de objetivos y metas influye en tres dominios interdependientes de los procesos de trabajo: la prestación y gestión de los cuidados, la evaluación del desempeño profesional y los procesos de formación continua. Se identificaron beneficios asociados a la mejora de la eficacia, la calidad y la seguridad de los cuidados, así como desafíos relacionados con metas poco realistas, un enfoque excesivo en indicadores cuantitativos y una limitada integración de las dimensiones psicossociales y subjetivas de la rehabilitación.

Conclusión: La definición reflexiva, colaborativa y centrada en la persona de objetivos y metas constituye un instrumento estructurante de los procesos de trabajo de los enfermeros de rehabilitación, contribuyendo a la excelencia clínica, el desarrollo profesional y la sostenibilidad de los servicios de salud. Se recomienda la utilización de indicadores sensibles a la rehabilitación y el fortalecimiento de competencias en planificación, comunicación y evaluación.

Descriptores: Enfermería en Rehabilitación; Calidad de la Atención de Salud; Proceso de Trabajo en Salud; Gestión en Salud; Objetivos; Indicadores de Calidad de la Atención de Salud

INTRODUCTION

Management by objectives constitutes a strategic approach in the organization of health services, guiding the planning, decision-making and evaluation of nursing care. The definition of objectives contributes to the effectiveness and efficiency of care processes, as well as to the quality and safety of care provided, constituting a central element of contemporary health management^(1, 2).

The work processes of rehabilitation nurses integrate care, management, training and research activities, requiring structured and flexible planning. In this context, the definition of objectives and goals is an essential component to ensure the effectiveness of care and the humanization of clinical practice⁽³⁾. These skills are aligned with the professional profile of the specialist rehabilitation nurse, which includes the design, implementation and evaluation of specialized programs aimed at functionality, quality of life and social participation^(4, 5).

These skills require mastery in the formulation of aims, since management by objectives represents a relevant and strategic contemporary approach for health services⁽⁶⁾. Its correct definition is fundamental and impacts several domains of professional practice: the provision and management of care, performance evaluation, and the training and continuing education processes essential for professional development, contributing to a professional practice of excellence.

In health organizations, aims are hierarchically distributed across strategic, tactical, and operational levels, deriving from national and sectoral health plans. For example, in respiratory rehabilitation: at the strategic level, they promote equitable access and prevent avoidable hospitalizations; at the tactical level, they create community programs articulated with primary care; and at the operational level, they reduce emergency room admissions due to exacerbations of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease by 10%. The challenge lies in harmonizing these aims across levels, leveraging organizational synergies without compromising the uniqueness of each individual rehabilitation process⁽⁷⁾.

In care management, aims are understood as the expected results for health, functionality and quality of care, while targets correspond to specific, measurable and temporally defined indicators that operationalize these objectives⁽⁸⁻¹⁰⁾.

The definition of aims is also a structuring factor in performance evaluation, allowing specialist nurses to identify skills to develop, assess progress, and promote clinical excellence. Additionally, they guide the training path and continuous learning, serving as a reference for the acquisition of skills, improvement of practices, and strengthening of specialized teams—essential elements for professional development.

Despite its relevance, the application of management by objectives in rehabilitation nursing

presents conceptual and practical challenges. Rehabilitation is a complex, multidimensional, and person-centered process, in which traditional performance indicators may not adequately capture subjective dimensions, such as identity reconstruction, psychosocial adaptation, and the re-signification of the life project⁽¹¹⁾. Thus, the definition of aims should be understood as a technical and ethical process that balances scientific rigor, clinical sensitivity, and person-centeredness.

Based on this framework, this article proposes to critically analyze how the definition of objectives and goals conditions the work processes of rehabilitation nurses and to propose recommendations for professional practice.

DEVELOPMENT

This reflection was based on a narrative review of the scientific literature, normative documents from the Ordem dos Enfermeiros, and the authors' clinical experience. Articles published between 2000 and 2025, guiding documents from professional entities, and classic literature on management by aims were included. The selection of documents considered thematic relevance, timeliness, and scientific impact.

The definition of objectives and goals constitutes a structuring element of the work processes of rehabilitation nurses, influencing the provision and management of care, the evaluation of professional performance, and continuing education processes. These interdependent domains constitute essential pillars for the quality, safety, and effectiveness of rehabilitation nursing practice.

In the organizational context, objectives and goals function as benchmarks for evidence-based decisions, in line with the principles of Evidence-Based Management. Well-formulated objectives guide the systematic collection of data and the definition of performance indicators, being essential for strategic, tactical, and operational decisions aligned with the institutional mission, vision, and values^(1, 12). Quantifying objectives allows for monitoring performance and supporting continuous improvement processes⁽⁸⁾.

In the provision and management of care, care management is a core competence of the general care nurse and is manifested through the systematic application of the nursing process⁽⁴⁾. In the case of specialist rehabilitation nurses, they design, implement and evaluate specialized programs aimed at quality of life, participation in society and the exercise of citizenship⁽⁵⁾.

The definition of aims guides clinical intervention, while goals operationalize measurable and temporally defined results. Advance care planning and shared decision-making allow objectives to be aligned with the preferences, values and clinical conditions of the person in rehabilitation, favoring

individualized and person-centered interventions⁽⁹⁾. These include, for example, improvements in cardiorespiratory, motor, sensory, cognitive aspects and in the performance of activities of daily living⁽⁵⁾.

The formulation of aims should integrate the nature of the desired situation, success criteria, target population, area of application and time-frame. They must be coherent, consistent and hierarchical, clarifying responsibilities ("Who does it?", "What?", "How?" and "When?") and promoting motivation, participation and collaboration⁽⁹⁾. The SMART model is a widely used tool, advocating Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound aims⁽⁸⁾.

The definition of aims also constitutes a structuring axis of professional performance evaluation, allowing individual practices to be aligned with organizational aims, identifying skills to be developed and monitoring progress. Indicators sensitive to rehabilitation, such as gains in autonomy and quality of life, allow the impact of interventions to be evaluated and promote a culture of responsibility and clinical excellence⁽¹³⁾.

In the field of training and continuing education, objectives and goals guide professional development, allowing rehabilitation nurses to update skills and align practices with institutional goals, objectives for improving care and individual professional development. This empowerment reinforces performance, promotes critical thinking and favors more effective and individualized interventions, being essential for professional development, nurse satisfaction and quality of services provided⁽¹⁴⁾. Training plans structured in general and specific objectives (both of which should follow the SMART principles) support effective pedagogical practices and contribute to the continuous improvement of the quality of care^(2, 15).

However, the definition and management of objectives in rehabilitation nursing involves complex challenges. Rehabilitation is a multidimensional process influenced by biological, psychological, social and environmental factors, requiring a holistic and person-centered approach, translating into realistic and meaningful goals for the person and their family^(9, 11). Unrealistic goals can generate frustration, emotional overload and risk of burnout, while excessive emphasis on quantitative indicators - times, activity volumes or productivity - tends to devalue subjective dimensions of care, such as autonomy, hope and the person's lived experience⁽¹⁶⁾. The tension between measurable institutional goals and personalized objectives constitutes a constant challenge, often aggravated by the scarcity of human, material and time resources for collaborative planning. These limitations end up restricting the person's effective involvement in defining the objectives of their own rehabilitation process⁽¹⁷⁾.

From an ethical point of view, the definition of aims must respect the autonomy, values and

expectations of the person in rehabilitation, promoting shared decision-making and realistic alignment between the team, the person and the family⁽⁹⁾. The development of skills in planning, communication and evaluation, associated with participatory methodologies, is fundamental to transforming objectives and goals into effective instruments for continuous improvement in work processes⁽¹⁸⁾.

Thus, the definition of objectives and goals profoundly impacts the work processes of rehabilitation nurses, and should constitute a reflective, collaborative and strategic practice that integrates technical-scientific rigor, person-centeredness and organizational development.

This reflection is based on a narrative review and the authors' clinical experience, which may introduce interpretive bias and does not allow for systematic generalizations. Empirical studies are needed to deepen the understanding of the impact of defining objectives and goals on the work processes of rehabilitation nurses.

CONCLUSION

The critical analysis developed shows that the definition of objectives and goals significantly conditions the work processes of rehabilitation nurses, influencing the organization and management of care, the evaluation of professional performance, and continuing education processes. When formulated clearly, measurably, and aligned with the institutional mission, objectives and goals contribute to the effectiveness, safety, and quality of care, enhancing gains in functionality, autonomy, and quality of life for people undergoing rehabilitation.

However, the reflection allowed us to identify relevant challenges, namely the tendency to define unrealistic goals, the predominance of quantitative indicators, and the insufficient integration of the subjective and psychosocial dimensions of the rehabilitation process. These factors can compromise the focus on the person, the motivation of the teams, and the humanization of care, reinforcing the need for holistic and participatory approaches in defining objectives.

In light of these results, it is recommended that collaborative goal-setting practices be adopted, involving the person undergoing rehabilitation, the family, and the multidisciplinary team, as well as the use of rehabilitation-sensitive indicators that integrate clinical, functional, and psychosocial outcomes. It is also recommended to invest in the development of rehabilitation nurses' skills in planning, communication, and evaluation, in order to strengthen the use of objectives and goals as strategic instruments for the continuous improvement of work processes.

It is concluded that the definition of objectives and goals, when conceived in a reflective, ethical, and person-centered manner, constitutes a structuring

instrument for the work processes of rehabilitation nurses, contributing to clinical excellence, professional development, and the sustainability of health services.

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