

# EDUCATION FOR DEATH: THANATOLOGY TRAINING FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

*EDUCAÇÃO PARA MORTE: FORMAÇÃO EM TANATOLOGIA PARA ATUAÇÃO EM SAÚDE*

*EDUCACIÓN PARA LA MUERTE: FORMACIÓN EN TANATOLOGÍA PARA PROFESIONALES DE LA SALUD*

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## ABSTRACT

Death, this natural and inevitable event, brings with it various representations according to the historical context in which it is inserted. From the evolution of science, death came to be seen as a failure and taboo, producing feelings of anguish and fear. In this context, it is understood that the denial of this event causes intense suffering, especially for health professionals who are in direct contact with it. The scarcity of spaces that promote a theoretical-technical-emotional training on the process of death and dying, results in professionals poorly prepared to deal with situations of terminality, which can cause psychological and physical illness and directly affect the quality of care provided to patients and their families. Therefore, this descriptive and exploratory manuscript seeks to report, from the point of view of the organizing team of a health teaching institution in Fortaleza, the experience of building a theoretical and experiential training in Thanatology for students and health professionals. We believe that the creation of this training can contribute to minimization of death's stigma and to the qualification of health care, enabling the recognition and sharing of difficulties and potentialities when facing death and dying.

**Descriptors:** *Thanatology; Education; Bereavement; Death; Healthcare Workers.*

## RESUMO

A morte, esse evento natural e inevitável, traz consigo diversas representações, de acordo com o contexto histórico em que está inserida. A partir da evolução da ciência, a morte passou a ser vista enquanto fracasso e tabu, produzindo angústia e medo. Nesse contexto, entende-se que a negação desse evento provoca sofrimento intenso, principalmente para os profissionais de saúde que estão em contato direto com o mesmo. A escassez de espaços que promovem uma capacitação teórico-técnica-emocional sobre o processo de morte e o morrer resulta em profissionais pouco preparados para lidar com situações de terminalidade, o que pode ocasionar adoecimentos psíquicos e físicos e afetar diretamente a qualidade da assistência prestada aos pacientes e aos seus familiares. Diante disso, esse manuscrito descritivo e exploratório busca relatar, a partir do olhar da equipe organizadora de uma instituição de ensino em saúde de Fortaleza, a experiência da construção de uma formação teórico-vivencial em Tanatologia para estudantes e profissionais da área da saúde. Acreditamos que a criação dessas formações possa contribuir para a minimização do estigma da morte e para a qualificação da assistência em saúde, possibilitando o reconhecimento e compartilhamento das dificuldades e potencialidades frente ao encontro com a morte e o morrer.

**Descritores:** *Tanatologia; Educação Continuada; Luto; Morte; Profissionais da Saúde.*

## RESUMEN

La muerte, ese acontecimiento natural y inevitable, conlleva diversas representaciones según el contexto histórico en el que se inserta. A partir de la evolución de la ciencia, la muerte pasó a ser vista como un fracaso y un tabú, produciendo sentimientos de angustia y miedo. En este contexto, se entiende que la negación de este hecho provoca un intenso sufrimiento, especialmente en los profesionales sanitarios que están en contacto directo con él. La falta de espacios que promuevan una formación teórica, técnica y emocional sobre el proceso de la muerte y el morir, da lugar a que los profesionales sean incapaces de enfrentarse a las situaciones de terminalidad de la vida, lo que puede provocar enfermedades psicológicas y físicas y afectar directamente a la calidad de la atención prestada a los pacientes y sus familias.

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Por lo tanto, este manuscrito descriptivo y exploratorio busca relatar, desde la perspectiva del equipo organizador de una institución de enseñanza de la salud en Fortaleza, la experiencia de construir una formación teórica y vivencial en Tanatología para estudiantes y profesionales de la salud. Creemos que la creación de este tipo de formación puede contribuir a minimizar el estigma de la muerte y para la cualificación de la atención sanitaria, permitiendo el reconocimiento y la puesta en común de las dificultades y potencialidades frente al encuentro con la muerte y el morir.

**Descriptores:** *Tanatología; Educación Continua ; Aflicción; Muerte; Trabajadores de la Salud.*

## INTRODUCTION

Death, a natural and inevitable event, brings with it several representations throughout history and social context. Currently, in Western culture, it is seen as failure and taboo<sup>1</sup>, occupying a place of refusal and interdiction<sup>1,2</sup>, mobilizing discomfort and withdrawal. However, the denial of this inevitable fact causes suffering, especially for those who need to deal with its presence on a daily basis, such as health professionals.

In this context, one can see the existing gap in the training of these professionals for a theoretical-technical and emotional preparation to deal with death and the dying process. This lack of training makes it impossible for them to create resources to deal with this distressing event, which can trigger psychological and physical illnesses and directly affect the quality of care provided to patients and their families.

Thus, the best way to deal with death is to invest in the creation of educational spaces for death<sup>2</sup>. So, due to the scarcity of spaces for dialogue and construction for this theme in Brazil, especially in the context of Ceará, we propose, from a teaching institution in the city of Fortaleza/CE, the creation of training courses for professionals and students areas of health that deal with Thanatology. These theoretical and experiential trainings, with 120 hours of duration, aim to create safe spaces in which professionals and students in the area can have their sufferings validated and can learn theoretically and technically the best way to deal with the inevitability of death, with the patient-family-team triad.

This experience report seeks, then, to discuss the importance of preparation to deal with the death process, through the presentation of the

experience of organizing a Training Course in Thanatology.

## METHOD

This is an exploratory descriptive research, developed from an experience report about the performance of the training organizing team of a health education institution in Fortaleza/CE, with the participation of the direction, coordination and monitoring. The aforementioned institute was created in May 2017 and its mission is to promote attentive and critical care in assistance, research and teaching in the health area, through excellent education. The experience reported took place from May 2019 to April 2021, specifically from the opening of the Thanatology Training course.

## RESULTS

From the understanding that death is a taboo topic, still scarce in training processes, the importance of creating spaces for education for death is highlighted, as a necessary, emerging and urgent response. The lack of preparation of most health professionals is mainly due to the structuring of the curricula of undergraduate courses that overvalue the cure and technology, with little emphasis on the management of terminal situations<sup>3</sup>.

As a result, professionals can create emotional mechanisms that, in addition to “protecting” the bond with the patient, reflect the inability to deal with the fragility of their own existence and that of their loved ones. Therefore, in the expectation of undoing this emotional and theoretical barrier in relation to the process of dying and aiming at training health professionals for emerging and necessary issues in the current context, in May 2019, the initiative for studies focused on the area of Thanatology.

The training in Thanatology aims to produce theoretical and technical knowledge for practice, but also to facilitate reflections and experiences about death in its various circumstances. In this way, they facilitate communication between the health team, patients and family members about this complex topic and the management with the care process in situations of terminality and grief.

The training classes take place once a month, with two thematic modules. Altogether, there are twenty-four modules, spread over twelve months, totaling a workload of 120 hours. The teaching team is made up of professionals who have training and experience in the area, so that they can provide not only consistent theoretical discussions, but also bring essential elements that are only learned through practice. In this way, the student has contact with complex discussions, which allow the expansion of a look at the processes of death and mourning.

The construction of the modules was carried out based on the apprehension of the main themes and discussions relevant to the area, seeking to address, in order of complexity, from the most basic elements to deeper and more specific questions. All modules are organized from a theoretical and experiential perspective, focusing not only on the transmission of theoretical and technical content, but providing the realization of listening spaces, dynamics, representations of clinical situations such as roleplays and discussions of real cases.

The structuring of the training grid includes: historical, cultural and philosophical aspects of death and dying; contemporary death education; formation and breaking of affective bonds; circumstances of death and types of mourning - understandings, forms of expression and confrontation; complications of grief; death and mourning in the different stages of the life cycle - childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age; death and grief for the family and the health team; primary, secondary and tertiary interventions in grief; management with suicide - prevention, postvention and

clinical management; handling in urgent and emergency situations; spirituality and religiosity in the approach to death and dying; palliative care and bioethics; communication from death to post-death. And, finally, we offer a specific module aimed only at practical experiences in the area.

Until March 2020, the classes were organized in the face-to-face mode, considering the complexity of the theme and the need for greater proximity to students. However, due to the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, following the recommendations of social isolation and physical distancing proposed by the World Health Organization (WHO)<sup>4</sup>, a new organization was demanded, with adaptations to new teaching-learning methodologies<sup>5</sup>. Since then, our teaching activities have remained strictly online.

Although the transition from the face-to-face model to the remote model was not without its difficulties and limitations, we were surprised by the gains and benefits of this process. Thus, not only do we finish existing classes, but we also create new remote courses. And we intend to keep this teaching modality, even with the return to the classroom.

The first class was scheduled to take place in person from May 2019 to April 2020, with the participation of 24 students. Among those enrolled, graduate students and health professionals, such as psychologists and social workers, but also from other areas, such as law and journalism. The meetings were always full of exchanges and open discussions on the themes. The last month took place online, following the course schedule and, to complete the training, the students presented a case study involving the theme of grief.

With greater maturity in this new modality, the second class started in September 2020 and will be completed in August 2021, with 60 enrolled students, keeping the constant number of psychology students, but also including areas such as dentistry, occupational therapy, physical education and medicine. The third class is also in progress, from March 2021 to February 2022, with 61 students

enrolled, expanding to the areas of pharmacy, physiotherapy, nursing and nutrition. This variety of areas allows for in-depth theoretical discussions from different perspectives, with the richness that interdisciplinarity provides.

The migration from face-to-face to online mode required pedagogical adaptations to new needs, as explained below. The first impact was the increase in the number of students, which called us to expand the team, relying not only on teachers, but also on pedagogical monitoring by coordination and monitoring. Remote learning allowed us to overcome the barriers of Ceará, reaching all other states in Brazil. Since then, students have been highlighting the importance of this new modality, reinforcing the lack of learning spaces related to dying in their cities, especially in the countryside.

The need to organize the course load was perceived, with the inclusion of interactive activities, in an attempt to get closer to the impact of the teaching process for students. One of the resources used was the meaning version, of how each content approached reaches the students, through the production of individual texts, so that students could share what they learned and felt during the meeting, allowing not only the fixation of the content, but a better elaboration of what is uniquely felt when talking about the aspects of death and dying.

At the end of the course, as a product of this teaching process, we ask students to, as a group, produce a case study or the production of a care technology. The first allows students to exercise a clinical and contextualized approach, thinking about real situations based on the theories studied. The second allows them to produce a proposal for material that could become a reference for their practice or for other professionals, such as the creation of booklets, e-books, applications and other care resources. In this way, we provide the possibility of broadening the perspective of an interdisciplinary context for resources that can be adapted to different situations, and with constant feedback from students, we have realized that the course

allows for the advancement of their professional and personal development.

## DISCUSSION

The need to create training spaces that aim at theoretical and emotional training for the theme of death is evident<sup>6</sup>. Kovács<sup>7</sup> reveals that courses focused on this theme, since their inception, have fostered the intersection between pedagogical and therapeutic aspects, as they focus on cognitive and psychological preparation. It also highlights that only didactic courses can increase students' anxiety because there is no space to be careful with emerging feelings. It highlights roleplays, dramatizations, death fantasy exercises, living the epitaph, visiting cemeteries, building a biography, workshops, thanatodrama and using films, works and plays as useful resources to complement theoretical discussions.

In addition to the ongoing experiences in classes, we emphasize the use of the Meaning Version as a powerful practical tool, which consists of a type of account of the experience, which has been used in training, research and clinical supervision. It is an invitation to contact with perceptions, sensations and feelings, seeking to make sense of an experienced encounter, from a genuine speech pronounced right after the lived moment. This text can be written or recorded, depending on the interest<sup>8</sup>.

We also emphasize the Case Study as a methodological instrument that allows the problematization of a situation and the approximation between theory and practice. It refers to a detailed analysis of a single case, with the purpose of explaining the dynamics involved<sup>9</sup> in an illness process - when used in the context of the health area. Therefore, it allows one to investigate a certain phenomenon within an everyday context, enabling its understanding, based on description, explanation and deepening.

Another feature that deserves mention is aimed at the development of care technologies, as instruments that can facilitate care actions and processes, overcoming challenges in the context,

mobilizing benefits for patients, families and the health team. Merhy<sup>10</sup> classifies technologies into light, light-hard and hard. The first refer to interventions that are not associated with equipment, but emerge from the production of relationships, such as host groups or facilitation of communication processes; the second depart from structured knowledge that broadens the professional's perspective, such as a discussion of a clinical case or elaboration of assistance flows; and the latter are those involving physical equipment or devices, such as creating applications or paper information. In the course, we propose that students present assistance possibilities through technology projects that allow for a higher quality care that is adapted to the needs of the context in which they are or want to be inserted.

Thus, the Thanatology Training course allows students to improve their theoretical knowledge, reflecting on practice and on the crossings that are interconnected with the phenomenon of death, considering that learning involves plural and multidimensional aspects. For this, the professional needs to be available and open to the topic, with recognition of their adverse sensations and feelings, thus distancing themselves from the desired objectivity in the area of health and emotionally strengthening themselves in the face of the inevitability of death<sup>5</sup>.

The maintenance of training in the remote mode can be understood as a real-time adaptation, contributing to the qualification of health professionals in the context of the pandemic, based on the development of emerging and necessary skills in this context. One of the biggest challenges for the educational institution was, therefore, to maintain the quality of training in a completely new and wide-ranging model, since the number of students multiplied with the insertion in distance education. All of this becomes challenging, since the transposition of the presential to the remote model requires the incorporation of new active methodologies, in order not to make teaching massive.

Therefore, there was an intense investment on the part of the organizing team in planning new methodologies and evaluation mechanisms that would encourage the engagement of students in the teaching-learning process<sup>5</sup>. Despite the inherent difficulties that arise with the mediation of technologies, the use of this modality has brought several gains, mainly due to the expansion of our target audience, which will certainly promote critical changes in healthcare activities throughout Brazil.

In short, we understand that spaces for teaching about dying, such as these training courses, can facilitate the health care provided by both students and professionals, enabling the recognition and sharing of the difficulties and potentialities facing the encounter with death and dying.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The work with dying is challenging, yet urgent and necessary. Furthermore, there is an evident need for further pedagogical and therapeutic improvement, contributing so that health professionals are available and able to get in touch with this theme that calls them daily. Even if there is no time for training to be completed, opening up to the subject can cause major changes and facilitate contact with the inevitable.

We believe that the creation of these formations can contribute to minimizing the stigma of death, gradually deconstructing these ingrained social conceptions, encouraging each professional or student to multiply this look in their personal and work spaces, with benefits not only for their lives, but also for patient and family care. The feasibility of carrying out this process in the online modality makes us even more empowered, as it allows us to reach spaces in Brazil that would have little or no access to this improvement.

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