

Review articles

Integrative review on the phenomenology of death: integrating Thanatology into nursing education and practice

Revisão integrativa sobre fenomenologia da morte: integrando a Tanatologia na formação e prática da enfermagem

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Abstract

The phenomenology of death has been the subject of study in various areas of health care, seeking to understand the effects of Thanatology on different perspectives. This study analyzes the academic production that addresses the phenomenological influences in the study of Thanatology in nursing, through an integrative and bibliographic review, with a critical approach, performing a comparative analysis of the years, regions and types of writings of the academic productions researched. During the execution of this study, a total of 14 articles were reviewed and consulted, which highlight the need for more comprehensive thanatology education in undergraduate nursing courses, as well as the need for continuous training of health professionals who deal with the death process in patients. This training is recognized in the study as a crucial factor to be considered and incorporated into the academic environment, with the aim of better preparing nurses trained by universities in Brazil.

Keywords: phenomenology; nursing; Thanatology.

Resumo

A fenomenologia da morte tem sido objeto de estudo nas diversas áreas de atuação da saúde, buscando compreender os efeitos da Tanatologia sobre diferentes perspectivas. Este estudo analisa a produção acadêmica que aborda as influências fenomenológicas no estudo da Tanatologia em enfermagem, através de revisão integrativa e bibliográfica, com uma abordagem crítica, realizando uma análise comparativa dos anos, regiões e tipos de escritos das produções acadêmicas pesquisadas. Durante a execução deste estudo foram revisados e consultados um total 14 artigos, os quais destacam a necessidade de um ensino mais abrangente em tanatologia nos cursos de graduação em enfermagem, bem como a necessidade de capacitação contínua dos profissionais de saúde que lidam com o processo da morte em pacientes. Essa formação é reconhecida no estudo como um fator crucial a ser considerado e incorporado nos meios acadêmicos, com o intuito de melhor preparar os enfermeiros formados pelas universidades no Brasil.

Palavras-chave: fenomenologia; enfermagem; Tanatologia.

INTRODUCTION

"Death has been excluded from daily life, becoming almost a mystery and something to be feared," states Ariès (2017, p. 46). These words illustrate the marginalization of the topic of death in contemporary society, suggesting that its rejection could somehow prevent it. Feelings like fear, anguish, or aversion are frequently associated with death (Oliveira et al., 2013). Furthermore, people's attitudes toward the dying process vary significantly depending on their cultural, ethnic, or religious background (Jafari et al., 2015).

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Data availability: The research data are available in a repository. Study conducted at Universidade do Estado do Pará (UEPA), Belém, PA, Brasil.



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Death is the natural conclusion of the life cycle, and its study, known as thanatology, is essential for health professionals (Ribeiro et al., 2019). Thanatology, a term of Greek origin, combines “*thánatos*,” referring to the god of death, with “*logos*,” meaning study (Maranhão, 2009), and is thus defined as the “study of death” or the “science of death” (Assumpção, 2006).

Over the years, thanatology has consolidated itself as an indispensable science, aiming to foster a humanized and empathic practice of end-of-life care. According to Stein (2004), empathy allows the individual to access the other’s experience, recognizing it as belonging to them without losing the sense of alterity (otherness), but making it present in their own consciousness. Traditionally, hospitals were perceived as environments where mechanical interactions and impersonal treatment predominated — settings marked by the absence of empathy and human warmth (Santos; Bueno, 2011). In this context, the incorporation of thanatology into the health sphere represented a paradigm shift, providing a more welcoming approach attentive to the emotional and psychosocial needs in the process of caring for those in terminal stages of life.

Nursing practice, cited in the classic work “*Notes on Nursing: What It Is, and What It Is Not*” (Nightingale, 1859), must establish a profound commitment to patients’ well-being. In this sense, the confrontation with death can be a challenging and sensitive moment.

The human response to loss is shaped by several elements, including age group, emotional and cognitive development, the conditions surrounding the loss, the individual’s relationship with their family and the role they play in it, in addition to cultural and social aspects (Nia et al., 2016). At this point, impactful aspects such as age, physical problems, psychiatric conditions, ethnicity, religiosity, personalities, sociocultural experiences, and beliefs are reinforced (Waterkemper; Prado, 2011).

In addition to the various elements that surround the human response to death, its meaning also varies among individuals. The emotions triggered by the confrontation with death, whether in relation to one’s own finitude, the loss of loved ones, or even in professional contexts, manifest a diverse range of feelings, such as denial, anger, sadness, and bargaining. Thus, it is fundamental to dialogue and reflect on these emotions so that the process of death and dying can be understood and managed more appropriately.

Considering this perspective, research on death becomes essential to combat stigmas and offer *insights* for a better-prepared approach to this topic (Santos, 2009). This allows for an emphasis on humanization in the care of critically ill individuals and patients, as well as their loved ones, through measures that provide comfort and consideration. After all, as long as there is life, there is a need for care, demonstrating that death is a constituent part of life.

In this brief investigation, the relevance of thanatology in the field of nursing will be highlighted. This leads us to question: How can the understanding of thanatology enrich the education and professional practice of the nursing student?

In contrast to the theme raised, it is known that health professionals work hard to combat death, yet, curiously, they distance themselves from its study in their education and professional practice. In academic institutions, death is rarely integrated into the curricula, and when addressed, it is done in a superficial manner (Moura et al., 2018).

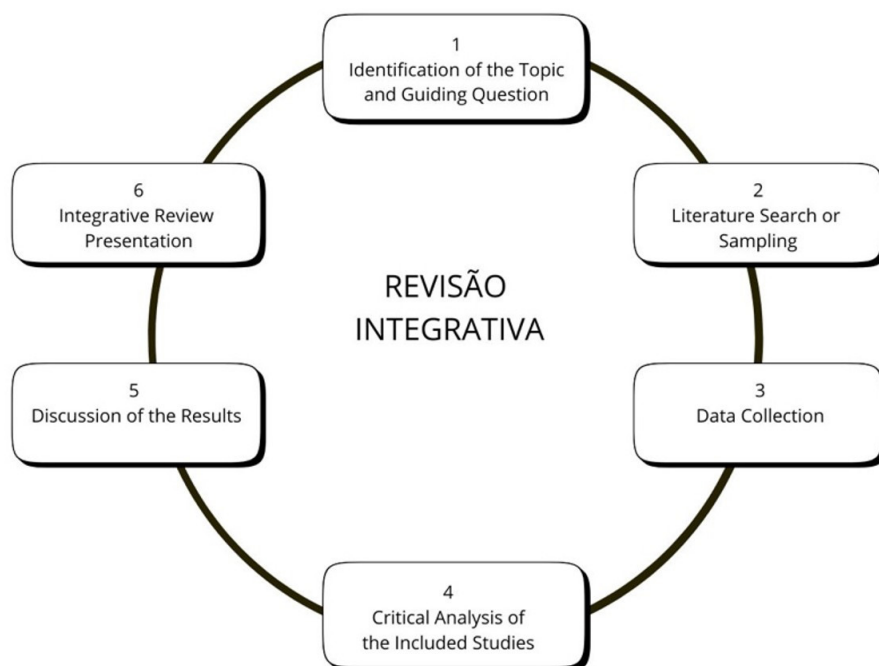
Nursing curricula frequently fail to give due attention to thanatology, leading to a superficial approach in professional practice. Educators identify a gap in academic training, perpetuated by the lack of a robust theoretical foundation and the insufficient time dedicated to the topic in the course subjects. The emphasis tends to focus on nursing techniques and physical care, highlighting the need for a more substantial integration of thanatology — either through an interdisciplinary approach or by means of specific disciplines (Bandeira et al., 2014).

The relevance of the study of thanatology transcends academic boundaries and extends to the hospital setting, where the challenge lies in the humanization of the service provided by health professionals. Such a holistic and dedicated approach to care tends to result in a lasting positive impression on the memory of those receiving care. Therefore, the present article aims to analyze academic works that discuss the phenomenological influences in the study of Thanatology applied to nursing.

METHODS

This is an integrative and bibliographic review study with a critical focus (Gil, 2008; Whittemore; Knafl, 2005; Minayo, 2012), which comparatively analyzes the years, regions, and types of writing of the academic productions surveyed. The objective is to consolidate knowledge and apply the results of relevant research to daily practice. The study was structured in defined stages, according to Figure 1.

Figure 1. Stages of the Integrative Literature Review; developed by the authors based on research data, 2023.



Source: Developed by the authors.

The execution of the method presented occurred throughout the months of October, November, and December of 2023.

SELECTION CRITERIA

A combination of keywords and descriptors, connected by the Boolean operator “AND”, was utilized. The chosen keyword was “thanatology,” and the descriptors related to the topic were “phenomenology” and “nursing.” These were identified through the Health Sciences Descriptors (DECS)/ *Medical Subject Heading Terms* (MeSH), developed by the *U.S. National Library of Medicine*, which was used as a vocabulary control method, through which the aforementioned descriptors were identified.

The search was conducted in Portuguese, English, and Spanish. This study is limited to compiling and analyzing the most relevant productions on the phenomenology of thanatology in nursing education. The term phenomenology originates from two Greek root words: *Phainomenon* and *logos*, which together mean “that which shows itself from itself.” Phenomenology, therefore, is the study of the phenomenon, with phenomenon understood as that which manifests or reveals itself by itself (Fujisaka, 2014)

The following inclusion criteria were used for the selected articles: articles related to the aforementioned topic, freely available and with full text, published between the years 2014 and 2024, in Portuguese, English, or Spanish, and which explicitly stated the philosophical framework adopted in their methodology. Exclusion criteria were: duplicated articles, those published more than ten years ago, and studies that did not address the topic. The initial selection process involved two independent reviewers, who examined the titles, abstracts, and descriptors of the studies, determining their inclusion in the study based on relevance to the addressed topic.

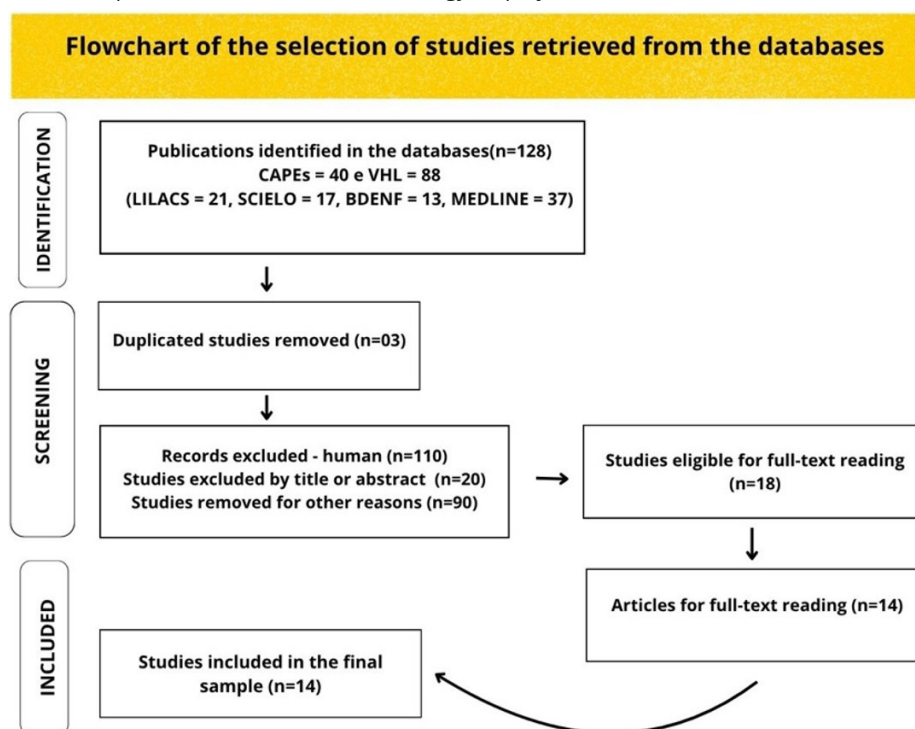
DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

The Capes and BVS-Bireme academic research portals, which provide access to databases such as LILACS, SCIELO, and BDNF, MEDLINE, were the tools chosen for conducting the research.

Ethical aspects

The results of this study are linked to the research project entitled: Thanatology in the undergraduate nursing course: a dialogical intervention, carried out in conjunction with the Postgraduate Program in Health Education in the Amazon at the State University of Pará (UEPA). As this phase of the research is not related to research involving human subjects, authorization from the IES's Ethics Committee (CEP) was not required for this stage. The methodology employed is illustrated by means of a flowchart, detailed in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Descriptive Flowchart of the Methodology Employed.



Source: Developed by the authors.

RESULTS

A total of 14 articles were reviewed and consulted, which indicate the phenomenological influences in the study of thanatology in nursing. The results from the analysis of the studies on thanatology conducted in the field of nursing were organized into a table. This table aimed to describe the articles based on the authors, title, journal, years of publication, objectives, and research methods employed information that presents the focus of these academic productions, as shown in Chart 1.

Among the set of 14 identified sources, one master's dissertation originating from Brazil and 13 articles from various Latin American countries were found. Of the articles, 10 were written in Portuguese, with Brazilian authors, and 3 were in Spanish, with authors from Colombia and Mexico. The subjects addressed encompass a diversity of topics: health policies (1 article), the pedagogy of thanatology in undergraduate nursing courses (10 articles), and the practical application of thanatology in nursing (3 articles). Regarding temporal distribution, the articles were published in the following years: 2017 (1 article), 2018 (5 articles), 2019 (2 articles), 2020 (2 articles), 2021 (1 article), 2022 (2 articles), and 2023 (1 article).

Chart 1. Characterization of the Included Articles

Authors	Title	Journal	Year	Objectives	Method
Jaime Alonso Caravaca-Moreira, Maria Itayra Padilha	Trans Necropolitics: Dialogues on Power Devices, Death, and Invisibilization in Contemporary Times	Text & Context — Nursing	2018	To analyze the relationship between cisnormative social policies and the invisibilization and death (physical and symbolic) of trans entities through their life histories.	Qualitative and multicenter research that uses the theories of Necropolitics and Thanatopolitics as theoretical frameworks. 70 transsexual individuals from Brazil and Costa Rica participated in this investigation, interviewed during the years 2014–2015. Data were analyzed according to content analysis.
Sampaio, C. L., Neri, M. F. de S., Araújo, M. Á. M., Caetano, J. Á., Eloia, S. M. C., & Souza, Á. M. A. e.	Problem-Based Learning in Teaching of Thanatology in Undergraduate Nursing Program.	<i>Escola Anna Nery</i>	2018	To report a methodological learning experience, based on problems, in the Thanatology course (or Thanatology discipline).	Experience report of faculty members from the Undergraduate Nursing program regarding the use of problem-situations influenced by the problematization methodology and problem-based learning.
Gonçalves, R. G., Silveira, B. R. D., Pereira, W. C., Ferreira, L. B., Queiroz, A. A. R. de, & Menezes, R. M. P. de.	Teaching palliative care in undergraduate nursing education	Revista Rene	2019	To identify the teaching of palliative care in undergraduate nursing education.	A scoping review in the following databases: Latin American and Caribbean Health Sciences Literature (LILACS), Nursing Database (BDENF), Spanish Bibliographic Index on Health Sciences (IBECs), Cumulative Index to Nursing & Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), and Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System Online (MEDLINE).
de Paula, G. S., Gomes, A. M. T., França, L. C. M., Neto, F. R. A., & Barbosa, D. J.	Nursing in the Face of the Death and Dying Process: A Reflection in Times of Coronavirus	Journal of nurse and health	2020	To reflect on the challenges of nursing regarding the death and dying process in the face of the Coronavirus pandemic.	Reflective analysis study based on the reading, analysis, and interpretation of articles and reports from the Ministry of Health and the Federal Nursing Council.
Silvia Francine Sartor	Death in the Hospital Environment: The Testimony of the Person with Cancer.	Federal University of Paraná	2020	To understand the testimony of the person with cancer regarding death in the hospital environment	This is a qualitative study with a descriptive approach. The research was developed in a reference oncology hospital in the South of the country, in the adult inpatient units.
Trotte, L. A. C., Costa, C. C. T., Andrade, P. C. da S. T. de, Mesquita, M. G. da R., Paes, G. O., & Gomes, A. M. T.	Death and Dying Process and Palliative Care: A Necessary Plea for Undergraduate Nursing Education	Revista Enfermagem UERJ	2023	To analyze the perception of undergraduate nursing students regarding the theme of “the death and dying process” and its approach during their education/training.	To analyze the perception of undergraduate nursing students regarding the theme of “the death and dying process” and its approach during their education/training.

Fonte: Elaboração dos autores.

Chart 1. Continued...

Authors	Title	Journal	Year	Objectives	Method
Peña-Marcial, E., Díaz-Marcelo, J. S., Reyna-Avila, L., Pérez-Cabañas, R., & Bernal-Mendoza, L. I.	Anxiety and Level of Knowledge in Palliative Care in Students from Guerrero	Revista Ciencia y Cuidado	2022	To identify the knowledge in palliative care and anxiety toward death among students from the nursing schools of the Autonomous University of Guerrero.	Mixed, comparative, and phenomenological study using testimonial narrative. The selection was performed by simple random sampling with replacement, using as reference the list of students enrolled in the fourth year of the undergraduate nursing program from three schools. The sample for the quantitative study was 380 subjects of both sexes. A self-administered instrument, adapted and validated by the researchers, was used, integrated by three components: demographic information; level of knowledge in palliative care (Palliative Knowledge Test—PCKT); and fear of death (Collett-Lester Fear of Death Scale). For the qualitative research, six students from each school were included, totaling 18 participants chosen at random, and a deep interview with eight open questions was applied. Additionally, field diary notes were used to identify the emotional state of the participants.
Torres, D. G., & Gómez-Martínez, M. C.	Necessary Knowledge for Nurses to Work in the Oncological Intensive Care Unit	Revista de Enfermagem da UFSM	2018	To determine the knowledge of the nurse required to work in the Oncological Intensive Care Unit	Qualitative study carried out with seven social actors, based on Candela's competency theory. The multiple case study method was used, supported by an interview guide and a data collection form; these instruments were validated by experts in the area. Data collection took place from September to December 2016, followed by analysis from January to February 2017.
Siqueira Perboni, J., Zilli, F., & Oliveira, S. G.	Health Professionals and the Death and Dying Process of Patients: An Integrative Review	Persona y Bioética	2018	To know the scientific production regarding the relationship between health professionals and the death of patients.	Integrative literature review that utilized thematic analysis by approximation.
Ribeiro, B. S., Coelho, T. O., Boery, R. N. S. de O., Villela, A. B. A., Yarid, S. D., & da Silva, R. S.	Teaching Palliative Care in Undergraduate Nursing Education in Brazil.	Enfermagem Em Foco	2020	To identify the offering of courses that discuss the theme of Palliative Care in the Undergraduate Nursing programs of Brazilian federal universities.	Documentary research, conducted in the months of August and September 2018, based on the Political Pedagogical Projects and curricular matrices of the nursing courses, available online on the websites of the federal universities.

Fonte: Elaboração dos autores.

Chart 1. Continued...

Authors	Title	Journal	Year	Objectives	Method
Moura, L. V. C., Passos, E. C. S., Santos, R. M. M., Santa Rosa, D. D. O., & Sobrinho, C. L. N.	Teaching Palliative Care in Undergraduate Nursing Education in Brazil.	Revista Baiana de Enfermagem	2018	To identify the theme of thanatology in the curricular components of Undergraduate Nursing programs.	Quantitative, descriptive, and exploratory research with a documentary basis. The sources were the pedagogical project and the curricular matrix made available on the websites of Higher Education Institutions in Bahia according to the following criteria: active on-site course in 2015 and accredited by the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC).
Alejandro Moctezuma-Paz	Thanatology Education in Nursing	Educación tanatológica en Enfermería. Revista de Enfermería del Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social	2022	To increase the necessary knowledge regarding thanatological care for the patient or family, in order to raise the degree of awareness concerning its meaning, dissemination, and accessibility, considering that the comprehension of such care is important.	Description and reflection on the importance of learning the necessary care regarding thanatology.
Albuquerque, R. N. de, & Dias, V. R. Dias.	Death and Dying from the Perspective of Undergraduate Nursing Students	Revista CuidArte, Enfermagem	2021	To verify the perception of the Nursing student when facing death and dying during the formative process.	Qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory study, conducted through semi-structured interviews with five graduating students from the Nursing program at a private higher education institution in the Federal District.
Lopes Joaquim, F., Costa Rosa Andrade Silva, R. M., Leite Funchal Camacho, A. C., Silva Melo, S. H., Ramos Pereira, E., Lopes Joaquim, F., Costa Rosa Andrade Silva, R. M., Leite Funchal Camacho, A. C., Silva Melo, S. H., & Ramos Pereira, E.	Scientific Production on the Phenomenological Contributions to the Study of Thanatology in Nursing.	Revista Cubana de Enfermaria	2018	To analyze the scientific productions developed by nursing that address the theme of thanatology.	Search strategy: Use of the keyword "phenomenology" and the descriptors "nursing," "palliative care," and "thanatology." The search occurred in the following databases: MEDLINE, LILACS, BDNF, and SCOPUS. Inclusion criteria: Full articles available in the selected data portals that showed adherence to the theme in Portuguese, English, and Spanish, published between the years 2011 and 2015, and that presented the adopted philosophical framework in the methodology.

Fonte: Elaboração dos autores.

In this compilation of academic productions, 5 articles used interviews as a methodology for presenting results, 6 conducted bibliographic studies on thanatology and palliative care in nursing, and 3 addressed documentary research, investigating how Brazilian universities integrate thanatology into nursing education, both in elective and mandatory courses.

The findings of this bibliographic survey endorse the perception that the integration between nursing theory and practice in the thanatology approach is both feasible and enriching for professional development in higher education institutions (Sampaio et al., 2018). This analytical perspective of thanatology (Gonçalves et al., 2019), despite its still incipient application, exerts significant influence on mandatory and, especially, on elective courses.

This generates a lack of preparation in direct nursing practice and can lead to frustration among nurses. Nursing professionals are not being adequately prepared to deal with death, as it can be synonymous with psychological distress and stress, just as the patient's death has become a synonym for professional failure (Paula et al., 2020). For this reason, it is fundamental that nurses receive greater preparation in thanatology, considering that their practice ranges from simple cases to complex situations, such as oncological diseases that may progress to imminent death (Torres; Gómez-Martínez, 2018; Santos; Hormanez, 2013).

This reflection is important, as death brings both objective and subjective issues to light. Objective in the sense of more specific information and training (Pena-Marcial et al., 2022) so that health professionals can better cope with the cases that occur, and subjective because human beings cannot view things in a cold manner. Health professionals, especially nurses who are dealing day after day with patients, many of whom pass away in their daily practice (Trotte et al., 2023, Albuquerque; Dias; Dias, 2021).

The research results present a gap regarding the coping strategies that nurses need to adopt when facing death (Siqueira Perboni; Zilli; Oliveira, 2018). Few universities address the subject of palliative care and thanatology in an intentional and direct manner (Sartor, 2020; Silva; Campos; Pereira, 2011).

DISCUSSION

The data presented reveal the current state of education and the need for greater training on how to care for a patient facing death. The majority of the articles found express a concern regarding the training of nursing students to acquire greater knowledge and information and thus be better equipped to deal with the frontline work with patients. The scarcity of academic works in the Hispanic language also demonstrates a prevailing need within the academic environment.

On the other hand, the articles found have shown a balance between bibliographic, documentary, and field research. While there is a reflection on the topic within academic circles, there are also various attempts to understand the performance of health professionals. The interviews conducted in the articles confirm that there is still a path to tread in incorporating the phenomenology of thanatology into nursing courses.

Furthermore, in the scenario preceding death, care must not be neglected or poorly delivered. Therefore, as long as life exists, even if the individual passes away, care persists. This indicates that, while there is life, there is a demand for care (Santos; Hormanez, 2013). The care provided to the body after death, as well as the support given to bereaved family members, are gestures of respect and dignity; not only in the bureaucratic rigor of body release but also in the sensitive attention to the pain of loss, ensuring that the final act of care toward the living person reverberates in the welcoming of those who remain. According to Cavalcanti (2019) post-mortem care should meet the needs of the family by providing information, support, and education. This aspect aligns with recent studies, which reinforce the importance of ensuring a dignified farewell and offering sensitive welcoming at the end of life (Lucena et al., 2024). Furthermore, social and spiritual support networks demonstrate a protective role in the grieving process, alleviating symptoms resulting from the loss (Barbieri, 2019). In the event of a death, the challenge is even greater, as the nurse may view death as a personal as well as a professional defeat, thus bringing forth a series of negative emotions, including disappointment, sadness, anxiety, internal doubts, feelings of devaluation, injustice,

vulnerability, discontentment, helplessness, and even anger (Santos; Hormanez, 2013). These situations require health professionals not only to have technical and scientific mastery but also to learn how to manage their emotions when facing death (Sampaio et al., 2018).

CONCLUSION

The academic production pertinent to the phenomenology of thanatology in the field of nursing is revealed to be restricted in the databases searched, although essential in studies that consistently raise an amplified interest in the conscious implementation of strategies and methods for approaching the incidence of death. The works investigated are of significant importance for elucidating the urgency of this specialized training within nursing education programs.

The strategic importance of studying thanatology, with its implications and methodologies for the effective management of terminal situations, is a pillar for the advanced development of nursing practices. Initiatives aimed at this training must be encouraged from the initial levels of undergraduate courses, establishing a solid foundation for the formation of a professional who is fully integrated and capacitated for the complexities of end-of-life care.

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Authors contribution

GOZE: Conceptualization; Methodology, Data curation, Writing – original draft. LG: Visualization, Formal analysis. RCT: Conceptualization, Project administration (advisor), Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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