

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE MOTIVATION FOR CHOOSING NURSING STUDIES

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A. Study design/planning • B. Data collection/entry • C. Data analysis/statistics • D. Data interpretation • E. Preparation of manuscript • F. Literature analysis/search • G. Funds collection

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The factors that provide the motivation for choosing a particular field of study and, consequently, a future profession include individual interests, professional aptitude, an expected sense of satisfaction, prospects of further success, and the possibility of getting an interesting, well-paid job.

Aim of the study: To determine the motivation for choosing nursing studies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Material and methods: The survey was conducted among 209 first-year nursing students using an electronic version of the authors' survey questionnaire.

Results: When choosing a field of study, the largest percentage of respondents were guided by the desire to help and care for other people (67.46%), the possibility of obtaining a high level of satisfaction resulting from saving health and lives (63.64%), and developing their interests in health and medicine (63.64%). The majority of respondents (73.21%) said that the pandemic did not influence their choice of studies. In the group of respondents who declared that the pandemic had an impact on their decision to choose a field of study, for 55.17% it turned out to be a positive one.

Conclusions: When choosing a field of study, respondents were guided by the desire to help and care for people, the possibility of gaining a high level of satisfaction resulting from saving health and lives, and the opportunity to develop their interests. The majority of respondents said the pandemic had no impact on their choice of studies, whereas for the others the impact was mostly positive.

Key words: nursing, studies, motivation, COVID-19 pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

Every year, a lot of high school graduates must choose a subject to study and a university. These future students are motivated by their interests, abilities, and aptitudes. As far as the choice of studies is concerned, important motivational elements also include a sense of satisfaction with the goals achieved, the prospect of further success, the possibility of getting a well-paid job, having a university education, job security after graduation, or the prospects of pursuing a professional career in other countries [1].

The image of a modern nurse in Polish society depends on many factors and is constantly subject to change. Nursing is perceived both through professional competences, salary level, and prestige, and through stereotypes deeply rooted in society [2]. It should be noted that a conscious choice of studies

that is consistent with students' beliefs correlates with both the course of their studies and further professional practice [3].

Among numerous reasons for choosing nursing as a profession, the desire to help others is a prevailing factor. Students choosing to study nursing are driven by pro-social motivation, putting the well-being of others above their own. This results in a high opinion of nursing in society, which is confirmed by the fact that in 2019 the nursing profession was ranked second in the ranking of professions with the highest social recognition in Poland [4]. However, the still popular image of nursing as an auxiliary profession that has no autonomy and is badly paid may be the reason for the decline in interest in the nursing profession [5]. Also, potential risks that the job involves may negatively affect young people's willingness to

study nursing. The outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 and the resulting pandemic declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 March 2020 not only brought about changes in the functioning of society and the health care system but also significantly affected nurses' health and their sense of security. In addition, the crisis resulting from these unusual circumstances gave rise to fear and uncertainty among the nursing staff [6]. This is even more important because the constant tension associated with performing professional duties may, as a consequence, significantly reduce the quality of services provided [7, 8].

Taking all these factors into consideration it seems vital that in order to encourage students to choose a nursing career, some measures must be taken so as to increase nurses' salaries and their job security by improving working conditions [9].

AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study was to determine the motivation for choosing nursing studies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study was conducted between November 2020 and January 2021 among 209 first-year nursing students from 6 universities and colleges located in the regions of Lesser Poland, Lublin, Pomerania, and West Pomerania. The criterion for participation in the study was being a first-year nursing student and giving voluntary consent. The majority of the study group were women ($n = 198$, 94.74%). The ages of the surveyed students ranged from 18 to 34 years. Most of the respondents were 19 years old ($n = 154$, 73.68%). The respondents most commonly came from rural areas ($n = 106$, 50.72%) (Table 1).

The study employed a diagnostic survey method with an electronic version of the author's survey questionnaire, which was developed using Microsoft

Forms and distributed via social media. The questionnaire contained closed and open-ended questions and was divided into two parts. The first part included questions examining the respondents' ideas about nursing and investigating their motivation for choosing to study nursing during the COVID-19 pandemic. The second part was related to basic sociodemographic data (age, sex, place of residence). Before taking part in the survey, respondents were informed of its anonymity and voluntariness. Completion of the questionnaire was tantamount to informed consent to participate in the study. The survey was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Statistical data were compiled using Excel version 2102. The results included both quantitative and qualitative data.

RESULTS

In the first part of the questionnaire respondents were asked about their perception of nursing. Less than half of the respondents ($n = 88$, 42.11%) had some perception about nursing before starting their studies, but in the case of 30.68% ($n = 27$) of them, these were negative ones (Fig. 1).

When choosing a field of study, the largest number of respondents were motivated by the desire to help and care for other people ($n = 141$, 67.46%), the possibility of gaining a high level of satisfaction resulting from saving health and life ($n = 133$, 63.64%), and the opportunity to develop interests in health and medicine ($n = 133$, 63.64%). For some of the respondents ($n = 12$, 5.74%), the decision to study nursing was based on a desire to change careers (Fig. 2). Other responses included the fact that it was easy to find a job and the possibility of working abroad.

Then the respondents were asked to assess the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic affected their motivation for choosing a subject to study. Nearly three-quarters of them ($n = 153$, 73.21%) said that the pandemic had no impact on their choice (Fig. 3).

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the study group

Variable	M \pm SD	Min-max
Age (years)	19.60 \pm 2.12	18.00-34.00
	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Women	198	94.74
Men	11	5.26
Place of residence		
Village	106	50.72
Town (population < 20,000)	22	10.53
City (population > 20,000)	81	38.76

M – average value, *SD* – standard deviation

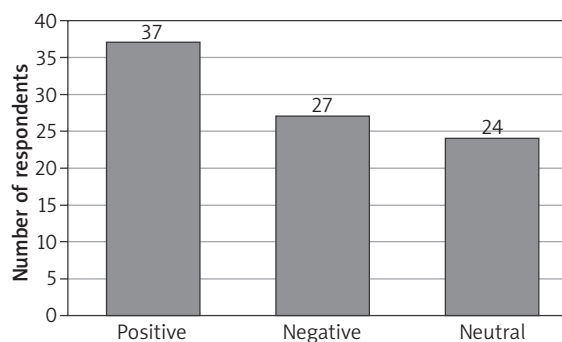


Figure 1. Respondents' perceptions of nursing before starting studies



Figure 2. Respondents' motivation for choosing a field of study

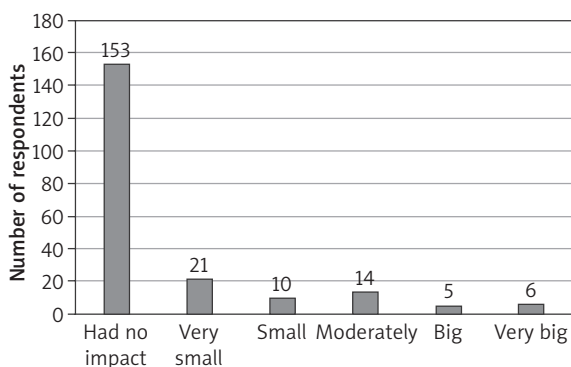


Figure 3. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the motivation to choose a field of study

Those who declared that the pandemic had an influence on their decision to choose a field of study ($n = 52$, 17.93%) were asked to justify their answer. The responses obtained were divided into positive and negative ones, with the former group being more numerous ($n = 29$, 55.17%). The students indicated, for example, a change of place and path of their education, reflections about the future and the choice of the field of study, inefficiency of the health care system and shortage of medical staff, and the appreciation of the work of medical staff. The table below presents sample responses (Table 2).

The respondents were also asked whether they were planning to continue their studies despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The vast majority gave an affirmative response ($n = 203$, 97.12%) (Fig. 4).

DISCUSSION

Since the beginning of the pandemic 6,017,601 cases of SARS-CoV-2 infections have been confirmed in Poland, and 116,437 people infected with COVID-19 have died, including health care workers who were on

Table 2. How the COVID-19 pandemic affected the decision of choosing a field of study

Selected justification categories	Sample responses
A change of place and path of respondents' education	"It changed my preference for the choice of the city, (...), it changed my choice from a polytechnic to medical university"
Reflections about the future and the choice of the field of study	"It helped me make decisions about my studies. It motivated me to choose nursing rather than other subjects" "When the pandemic broke out, I wanted to choose another subject to study not nursing because I was afraid of working on the front lines. However, by the time I was enrolled at university, I had thought it over and realized that nursing is what I want to do in the future, and facing the unknown is an integral part of this profession"
Inefficiency of the health care system and shortage of medical staff	"The pandemic has shown the inefficiency of our country's health care system. (...) Nurses are now certainly more tired and overworked, but, at the same time, certainly more needed, which is also motivating" "(...) The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has shown in what a poor state our health service is. Therefore, I believe that young people who want to help and contribute to the improvement of the system should choose this field of study – so I did"
Appreciation of the work of medical staff	"(...) admittedly, the pandemic (...) made the public realize what important roles nurses, doctors, or paramedics play. When the world stopped, they did not stop their work, when everyone was afraid they fought and the world watched them and applauded..." "The pandemic (...) showed me how much this type of skilled personnel is needed"

the front lines [10]. SARS-CoV-2 infections have affected nearly 110,000 nurses, more than 250 of whom have died [11]. The need for drastic restrictions to limit the possibility of spreading the virus had a huge impact on the functioning of the entire society. The tremendous material and emotional support that medical staff initially received (hand-sewn masks when the supply of surgical ones was limited, donated lunches, applause from balconies) quickly gave way to fear and social distancing as health care workers started to be perceived as a potential source of infection [11]. In addition, a number of studies point to negative consequences of the pandemic among health care workers [12, 13]. It seems worrying that the prevalence of mental disorders is higher among nurses than among representatives of other medical professions [12]. Moreover, numerous reports also confirm the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on nursing students [14]. Many researchers have identified fatigue as one of the significant and frequently reported effects of forced social isolation [15, 16], the most significant consequence of which appears to be health deterioration in its physical, mental, and behavioural dimensions. This manifests as a decrease in people's interest in activities that previously gave them pleasure, lower motivation to take action, difficulty in controlling emotions, irritability, increased anxiety, depression, excessive worrying [15, 17], as well as general weakness, sleep problems, headaches, and muscle and back pain [15, 18].

The authors of the present study believe that the aforementioned issues can destructively influence the choice of a field of study. Our study, therefore, focused on an attempt to determine the motivation for choosing nursing studies.

Our own study indicates that the main motivation for choosing to study nursing was the desire to help and care for other people. This reason was also dominant in the studies of other authors [19-23]. According to the survey we conducted, an important motivation for studying nursing included opportunities to develop one's interests and gain high professional satisfaction. Publications by other authors mention the following motives for choosing nursing studies: the desire to interact with people, the sense of being needed, empathy, and interest in medical science [20-22, 24, 25], with the latter being also observed in our study. The reason for starting nursing studies may also be the usefulness of the acquired knowledge and skills in everyday life [20], a conscious desire to take up another profession [23], or the possibility of obtaining higher education [22]. In addition, the choice of a nursing career guarantees that it will be easy to find a job, also in another country [19, 20]. Motivations for choosing to study nursing varied depending on the number and types of other courses that were taken into consideration [22], but a lot of respondents would choose this profession again [19]. The results of a number of stud-

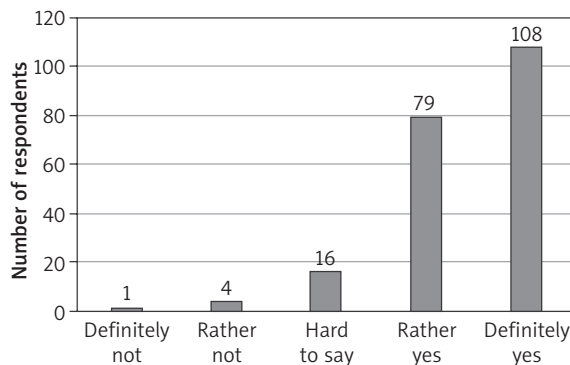


Figure 4. Are you planning to continue your nursing studies?

ies have also identified factors that discourage people from studying nursing, which include inadequate remuneration [21, 26] and some images that are associated with a nursing profession and make it appear to be a "dirty", difficult, and undervalued job [25]. In addition, it has been shown that the reason for not choosing nursing as a future profession is the negative opinions of peers and society [21]. Unfortunately, nursing, despite high recognition and respect from society, is characterized by average professional prestige [27]. It was expected that the pandemic-induced prospects of distance learning may discourage people from studying subjects such as nursing, for which practice and contact with patients play such an important role. However, the vast majority of respondents felt that the pandemic did not influence their decision, and if it did, it was a positive influence. Such an influence can undoubtedly be considered a situation in which a young person facing world-changing events comes to the conclusion that nursing is a much-needed profession and wants to educate themselves in this direction. However, it is difficult to compare the motivation for the choice of nursing studies from the pre-pandemic era and the present times because similar studies have not been very popularized.

CONCLUSIONS

When choosing a field of study, respondents were guided by their desire to help and care for other people, the possibility of gaining a high level of satisfaction resulting from saving health and lives, and the opportunity to develop their interests.

Most of the respondents claimed that the pandemic had no impact on their choice; for the others, the impact was mostly positive.

Disclosure

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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