

Extension experience in the elderly health care program during the covid-19 pandemic

Experiência extensionista no Programa de Atenção à Saúde do Idoso durante a pandemia da covid-19

Experiencia de extensión en el programa de atención a la salud del adulto mayor durante la pandemia del covid-19

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RESUMO

Objetivo: descrever a experiência vivenciada por uma acadêmica de Fisioterapia em um programa de extensão voltado à saúde do idoso no Amazonas, no período da pandemia da covid-19. **Método:** trata-se de um estudo descritivo, tipo relato de experiência. **Resultados:** os achados deste estudo foram divididos em tópicos: apresentação do Programa de Atenção à Saúde do Idoso, descrição das experiências vivenciadas e desafios encontrados. **Conclusão:** a experiência mostrou-se edificadora na formação acadêmica, tanto por proporcionar um contato com o público externo à universidade quanto por proporcionar uma rica troca de saberes entre os acadêmicos de diferentes áreas.

Descritores: Idoso; Relações Comunidade-Instituição; Covid-19.

ABSTRACT

Objective: To describe the experience of a Physiotherapy student in an extension program aimed at the health of the elderly in Amazonas during the Covid-19 pandemic. **Method:** this is a descriptive study, type of experience report. **Results:** The findings of this study were divided into topics: presentation of the elderly health care program, description of the experiences and challenges encountered. **Conclusion:** The experience proved to be edifying in academic training, both for providing contact with the public outside the university and for providing a rich exchange of knowledge among academics from different areas.

Descriptors: Aged; Community-Institutional Relations; Covid-19.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: describir la experiencia de una estudiante de fisioterapia en un programa de extensión centrado en la salud de los ancianos en Amazonas, durante la pandemia de COVID-19. **Método:** se trata de un estudio descriptivo, del tipo relato de experiencia. **Resultados:** los resultados de este estudio se dividieron en temas: presentación del Programa de Atención a la Salud del Anciano, descripción de las experiencias y desafíos encontrados. **Conclusión:** la experiencia resultó edificante para la formación académica, tanto por el contacto con el público externo a la universidad como por el rico intercambio de conocimientos entre académicos de diferentes áreas.

Descritores: Anciano; Relaciones Comunidad-Instituciones; Covid-19.

Introduction

The number of elderly people in Brazil has been growing exponentially, and, when comparing data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) for the years 2012 and 2021, there is an increase of 3.4% in the population aged 60 and over and a reduction of 5.4% in the number of people under 30 years of age, which represents a change in the age structure of the Brazilian population and signals a need for public policies directed to the real needs of this population in order to provide for healthy ageing.¹

Aging, in turn, is a term used to describe a set of changes that occur at morphological, physiological, biochemical, and psychological levels, among others, and may present individual and collective characteristics². Thus, aging occurs to all people, but when it comes to active aging, the reality of part of the population is not this, after all, active aging is a process that encompasses several factors, such as: physical, mental and social health care; participation in economic, social and cultural issues; among others.³

Seeking to continue in line with Law No. 8,842/944, which provides for the National Policy for the Elderly and establishes the rights of this population, the institutionalized extension program of the Federal University of Amazonas (Ufam) entitled Health Care Program for the Elderly (Proasi), emerged in 2003 and, since then, has carried out activities with the objective of developing integration and autonomy of the elderly through health promotion and education practices. as well as reaffirming the University's commitment to research, teaching and extension. After all, being active after the age of 60, respecting their peculiarities, limits and potential, is everyone's right.⁵

The COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome virus (SARS-CoV-2), which arrived in Brazil in early 2020, left no doubt that the most affected population was composed of the elderly, who, as well as diabetics, hypertensives, and those with respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, made up the risk group.⁶ Despite the effectiveness of isolation measures in combating the spread of the virus, Some consequences for the elderly could be noted, with emphasis on the increased downtime. This consequently contributed to a greater sedentary lifestyle in this population, with a reduction in the load on the musculoskeletal system and loss of muscle mass, causing sarcopenia, frailties and comorbidities.⁷

Studies concluded that the covid-19 pandemic caused changes in the social, psychological, and physiological levels of people aged 60 and over and that the large number of daily deaths related to this disease was capable of triggering moments of fear and anxiety in the elderly, who, by isolating themselves in their homes, were more prone to muscle atrophy processes and risks of falls.⁸

The measures taken by health agencies and the decrees of other government authorities in an attempt to curb the spread of the virus resulted, among other situations, in the paralysis of face-to-face activities in educational institutions. Therefore, the Federal University of Amazonas and consequently the extension projects linked to it had their face-to-face activities paralyzed.

In view of the above, Proasi had its activities reformulated to the remote format, which required members to make a quick decision about how the program could proceed with its actions. Therefore, the solution found to

continue Proasi's activities was through social media, initially with posts on themes related to the health of the elderly.

Thus, the present investigation seeks to describe the experiences of a Physical Therapy student in a health care program for the elderly, in Amazonas, during the covid-19 pandemic.

Method

This is a descriptive study of the experience report type. The experiential immersion of the Physical Therapy student occurred during her participation as a scholarship holder in the institutionalized extension program of the Federal University of Amazonas (Ufam), the Health Care Program for the Elderly (Proasi). The trial period runs from October 2020 to April 2023.

The Health Care Program for the Elderly (Proasi) was established in the city of Manaus on January 28, 2003, is headquartered at the Manaus School of Nursing (EEM) and represents an institutionalized extension program of the Federal University of Amazonas (Ufam) whose objective is to articulate educational practices, carry out preventive and health care actions for the elderly. Proasi operated until the beginning of 2020 exclusively in person, having developed during this period health education activities, nursing consultations, care for psychology and physiotherapy professionals, recreational and commemorative activities, English classes, external outings and home visits.

The city of Manaus, capital of the state of Amazonas, is located in the North region, has an area of 11,401.092km² and is the most populous city in the region, with more than 2 million people according to IBGE data from the year 2022.⁹

The coordination of the Health Care Program for the Elderly is composed of professors from the Federal University of Amazonas involved with gerontology and geriatrics. As for the team of students, Proasi includes scholarship holders and volunteers from the Nursing, Medicine and Physiotherapy courses.

Proasi's actions were organized through online meetings between coordinators and students, and they produced the monthly action plan, which acted as a guide for the activities carried out, precisely because it contained the deadline and description of the month's actions. Such actions were mostly carried out in pairs or trios, enabling a rich exchange of multiprofessional knowledge among students and favoring the development of interprofessionality from the academic period.

Seeking to facilitate the reader's understanding, the experience lived in the Health Care Program for the Elderly will be divided into some topics. In the first moment, there will be a report of the activities carried out and, then, the challenges encountered to carry out these activities will be exposed. As a way to complement this study, there will also be a brief report about Physical Therapy and its performance in Proasi.

Results

The realization of the activities in the remote format had facilitating and hindering points. The decision of what would be done each month was previously scheduled with the program coordinators together with the students. All the material produced was previously analyzed by all members in order to avoid the publication of erroneous or outdated information, as well as to suggest improvements in the design and layout and revision of spelling.

The target audience of the actions were people aged 60 and over, as well as Proasi's followers on social media, composed mostly of students and health professionals. During the period of the experience, digital educational materials aimed at the health of the elderly were developed, namely: posts of images and animated videos on health themes, podcasts, lives, conversation circles.

Activities developed at Proasi during the covid-19 pandemic

The decision to operate in the remote format was made in view of the pandemic scenario and the impossibility of carrying out face-to-face activities, however, even having this defined, there were still many doubts about how these actions could be developed so that Proasi could reach the target audience effectively.

The virtual meetings between the students and the coordination of the Health Care Program for the Elderly were indispensable in the reconstruction of Proasi, given that it was in these moments that ideas and directions emerged regarding how the team would act to meet the objectives of Proasi.

Based on the premise that preventive actions are valuable and essential for quality of life, they represented the vast majority of the activities carried out by the extension program in question during the covid-19 pandemic.

That said, the alternative found was the production of digital materials aimed at health issues for the elderly population. Initially, these materials correlated with the current scenario, disseminating relevant information about the covid-19 pandemic and disseminating health campaigns such as: Pink October and Blue November.

On Instagram, with a profile named @idoso._proasi (Figure 1), during the trial period, 121 posts were published that referred to monthly health campaigns, such as: breast and prostate cancer prevention, suicide prevention, blood donation, information on the vaccination schedule and encouragement to use masks and hand sanitizer.



Figure 1- Proasi's Instagram Feed
Source: Proasi archives, 2023.

As the team's meetings took place, new ideas were put on the agenda, and that's how, in November 2021, Proasi's first two podcasts were made available on audio platforms, marking a new field of action for the team.

After the coordinators' suggestions, the idea of the Health Care Program for the Elderly promoting events aimed at students and those interested in the area of gerontology was raised. It was then that, in April 2022, the first live of Proasi took place, which was attended by a guest speaker to address the theme: "Containment in elderly people and its harms". In summary, it was following these fronts that the Health Care Program for the Elderly maintained its remote activities during the pandemic scenario.

Seeking to strengthen the bonds of the members with the research, the coordinators of Proasi encouraged the participation of students in congresses and online events and, thus, simple abstracts were produced and presented in national and international events.

Still in the period of the covid-19 pandemic and as soon as the partially face-to-face return to activities was authorized, Proasi partnered with Ufam's Active Life Program (Project composed of retired university employees), from the Department of Health and Quality of Life (DSQV), and, in September 2022, the Proasi team attended the site in person and, In a conversation circle, he addressed the theme of the month: Yellow September. This was the first opportunity for Proasi members to come into direct contact with the elderly since the beginning of the pandemic, in 2020, and highlighted the transition period between remote and face-to-face activities.

At the beginning of 2023, the activities of the Health Care Program for the Elderly followed the script already reported: informative posts and podcasts on the health of the elderly, live educational lectures, and face-to-face activities in the Active Life Program. In February 2023, finally, the team meeting took place at Proasi's headquarters, in the Nossa Senhora das Graças neighborhood, Manaus, Amazonas. This moment consolidated the return to face-to-face activities. Since then, the team of the Health Care Program for the Elderly has met weekly at its headquarters to carry out educational activities and promote the health of the elderly, in addition to continuing in partnership with the Active Life Program and carrying out activities in digital media.

Challenges encountered

The first challenge encountered concerns the lack of skill on the part of the Proasi team with regard to the creation of digital materials, after all, this was carried out in image editor programs and applications, which contained tools that were not the domain of Proasi coordinators and students. However, with the sharing of learning and experiences among the team, increasingly, the handling and creation of health education materials were being facilitated and also the production time was considerably reduced, resulting in faster and higher quality productions when compared to initial productions.

The same obstacle mentioned above happened when the Proasi team started to produce podcasts, at which time there were difficulties in recording and editing audio due to the lack of intimacy with the editor applications. The scarcity of copyrighted images released for use was also an impasse experienced in the construction of digital materials, as well as the difficulty in finding books and studies with free access, which could support the information that would be passed on. With regard to participation in scientific events, the greatest difficulty was the lack of familiarity with the research, which made the first productions more time-consuming and less elaborate.

It is important to highlight that all the problems mentioned above were overcome with the debate and the exchange of knowledge among the team, which as it handled the tools and applications, began to have a greater mastery and consequently could instruct the other members when necessary.

Later on, the need arose to learn how to organize live events, taking into account that the students and coordinators of Proasi defined the realization of the first live of the Health Care Program for the Elderly, which came to take place in an online format, through video conference platforms and with the presence of a guest speaker. The event in question required more organization and interaction on the part of the members of the program and had as its greatest obstacle the inexperience in dealing with large audiences – more than 70 registrants – and meeting their demands, such as, for example, attendance form and sending certificates. In short, this first experience was essential for the improvement of the team, as it provided a demand for new knowledge and an effective exchange of knowledge and experiences among the students of the Health Care Program for the Elderly.

Proasi had the opportunity to meet face-to-face with its target audience, a fact that happened first in UFAM's Active Life Program and secondly at its own headquarters, as mentioned in the previous topic. Both situations required the members of Proasi to organize and plan in advance, after all, none of the current students had participated in person in activities with the elderly and this lack of face-to-face contact with the elderly was initially a hindrance, as it activated insecurities in these members. In summary, the first face-to-face meetings were extremely necessary and prepared the team for the other meetings. This means that, as face-to-face experiences followed, education and health promotion activities were carried out in a more professional and safe manner.

Among all these difficulties reported, there is one that cannot be completely solved by the Proasi team, which concerns the difficulty of access of the elderly to the platforms that were being used by the extension program, a fact that resulted in few interactions on social media with this audience and consequently little effectiveness of the materials that were produced for the

target audience. The alternative found by the team, seeking to alleviate this impasse, was to disclose to the relatives of the elderly the materials that were being produced and to ask the followers of Proasi in the digital media to do the same (Figure 2).



Figure 2 - Areas of action developed in Proasi.

Preventive Physiotherapy at Proasi

Although rehabilitation competence is more widespread in society, preventive functions are also inherent to the physiotherapist and to other areas of health, among which we can mention educational activities in health, which is in line with what was performed by the academic researcher in the period of this experience.

It is known that the health education process is complex and must be constantly evolving to meet the needs of society, in view of this, Proasi reformulated its activities with the arrival of the pandemic and adapted to the only possible way of acting in the face of this epidemiological scenario: remote action, which, as reported, included: digital materials and podcasts aimed at the health of the elderly, with an essentially preventive character, and online events.

At Proasi, the division of themes among the students occurred randomly, so it was not always possible to be responsible for digital material related to physiotherapy, and this was a hindrance. However, in some moments, in which there was this proximity of themes to the health area in question, the material was produced more easily by the student, in addition to being presented in a more detailed and explained way than when compared to digital materials with themes dissociated from physiotherapy.

To conclude, this scenario allowed the contact of a physical therapy extension student with educational and preventive actions since the academic period and, even if in digital format, it enabled a broad and early view of the importance of such activities in maintaining health, in addition to having provided an opportunity for an experience that is often achieved only after graduation.

Discussion

In the pandemic scenario, many extension projects had to be reformulated. The experiences reported here and the difficulties experienced are similar to what was reported by another study, which, when describing the experiences of extension students in the pandemic period, concluded that,

despite the contributions and atypical experiences that the remote period provided, face-to-face contact was missing.¹⁵

It is also said that, as much as some actions require the face-to-face format, the remote work that was carried out in the pandemic period cannot be abandoned and both forms of action must continue in parallel for the sake of health.¹⁶ In this sense, Proasi, after the pandemic, continued to operate in both environments: face-to-face and virtual.

It is also necessary to highlight the wealth of knowledge and experiences that are provided in an extension project, which complements the students' graduation, based on actions that are articulated with teaching and research, inducing not only technical but also ethical training¹³, configuring a fundamental academic practice, precisely because it enables integrated practices in several areas of knowledge.¹⁴

The Regional Council of Physical Therapy and Occupational Therapy (Crefito) defines Physical Therapy as the area of health that "studies, prevents and treats intercurrent functional kinetic disorders in organs and systems of the human body, generated by genetic alterations, traumas and acquired diseases".¹⁰

With regard to Physical Therapy and educational technologies as a form of health education, more studies are still needed that associate these aspects, in order to scientifically support the importance and benefits of physical therapy in this area, both for the professional and for the population, encouraging the use of new health education alternatives.¹¹

The Ministry of Health understands health education as an educational process of knowledge construction that aims at the appropriation of the theme by the listeners.¹² The educational activity aimed at the elderly is an important strategy to promote comprehensive care and favor healthy aging, and its implementation in the digital environment has been supported in order to break the stereotype involved in aging and its relationship with technology.¹⁷

However, there are still few studies that discuss how this process of virtual health education develops and how it can be improved, made more effective and easier to apply. This was one of the points where the Proasi team found it more difficult.

The objective of this report was to present new knowledge and stimulate new reflections on an agenda that is little scientifically discussed in the state of Amazonas, however, it has limitations because it is an experience report restricted to the perspective of a student and not of the entire team of the Health Care Program for the Elderly.

Conclusion

We concluded that the actions of Proasi in remote format proved to be useful and, despite the difficulty in reaching the target audience, health education was carried out not only for the elderly, but also for students and those interested in the topics addressed. Such activities proved to be extremely important, not only for the students, but mainly for the population that was able to appropriate the theme addressed.

All the experience mentioned in this study contributed significantly to the author's academic training, as it strengthened ties with science, encouraged the production of health education materials, enabled contact with new tools, as

well as provided a rich exchange of knowledge between students and coordinators. In this way, the extension experience in a project with remote activities due to the pandemic provided experiences that, in other times, could not be experienced and contributed to training with a different look.

In short, the face-to-face return of Proasi still faces obstacles to be overcome, the biggest of which is the rescue of the elderly who participated before the covid-19 pandemic. Regarding the experience in remote activities, it was of great value to the student, because, even without direct contact with the elderly, it provided experiences that could not be experienced before, configuring itself as essential for a rich education in the health area.

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