In March 2023, with support from the Federal Nursing Council, the Brazilian Ministry of Health and the Nursing School at Ribeirão Preto, Universidade de São Paulo, the Department of Human Resources Management at the Pan-American Health Organization held the Forum on Nursing Practice Regulation in the Region of the Americas, in Rio de Janeiro. Its synthesis is presented in this edition of the Official Journal of the Federal Nursing Council.

The event gathered 80 guests from 17 countries in the Region of the Americas, aiming to present the regulatory frameworks of the professional practice of nursing in several countries, discuss strategic actions to strengthen professional regulatory systems, and analyze requirements for the licensing of professionals and the renovation of these licenses, as well as competence tests, and criteria for continued education. The guests represented ministries of health from the countries involved, as well as international organizations, councils, and class associations. They offered presentations in working groups throughout the two intense days of the event.

Currently, there are three types of regulatory models for nursing professionals in the Region of the Americas. In the first, regulatory organs are directly controlled by the government through its Ministry of Health. This model is used by most countries in Central and South America.

The second is state-led and called ‘Arm’s Length Model’. In it, the regulatory body is selected by the ministry of health and has authority over subjects related with nursing. This is the model used to regulate nursing professionals in the Caribbean, where nursing councils are named by the ministry of health to regulate these professionals.

The third model is led by the professionals themselves. In this case, the regulatory body is regional, its authority is determined by state or federal laws, and it can enforce nursing practice standards. This is the model used in Brazil, Canada, and the United States. All countries in this Region have national laws to regulate the profession, as well as norms and regulatory frameworks. When this is regulated by the government, several organs are involved in the professional exercise of nursing.

Readers will note that, in general, forum participants have reiterated the need to update existing regulatory frameworks for several reasons, such as the possibility of increasing the scope of nursing competences, the lessons left by the pandemic, the evolution of technologies in the services, the structuring of health systems, and others. They also pointed at the need to invest on the capacity of regulatory agents and on the development of their competences.

Some countries, such as Canada, the United States, and all member countries of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), evaluate the knowledge of recent graduates through the application of exams, and only allow one to exercise the profession if approved. However, at time of publication, no Latin American country applies any examination of the sort. The debate showed that participants lacked knowledge and diversity, although some expressed the importance of this examination to guarantee qualified and competent nursing care to the population, especially considering the exponential growth in the number of nursing schools in some countries, and the emergence of distance education.

Another relevant topic discussed in the event was the requirement for continued education to renovate professional registrations. In some countries, professionals must prove to regulatory bodies that they underwent continued education activities every five years, on average, to renovate their registrations. This is done through courses, events, or others, specified by each country. In some of them, there are mandatory courses for nurses, while Canada, on the other hand, encourages professional self-evaluation, with continued education activities resulting from this process. Some workers are randomly selected when they renovate their registrations, and must prove that they went through a continued education process.

The importance of continuing education and the relevance of encouraging it during professional life are well known. A culture of learning throughout one’s life in the profession, aided by continuous formal opportunities for learning, mandatory or not, should be encouraged by regulatory bodies, since they increase the quality of care and the results of patients, increasing professional satisfaction of nurses and appreciation from the population.

In general, Forum participants were unanimous in stating that nursing professional regulations should continue to be discussed in national, state, and regional levels, and many of them can lead this initiative.

In addition to their important role in health services and in the front lines of the struggle against the pandemic, the activities of nursing professionals can have their scope increased by adequate education, updated regulations, and interprofessional, decent work that is capable of promoting equality and universal health, thus achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.
To improve the role of nurses in the Region of the Americas, the Pan American Health Organization highlighted that it is necessary to develop strategies that include a close connection between the sectors of health, education, work, and community; to promote the active participation of organizations in the discussion of work regulations and nurse education; and to promote the active participation of nursing professionals in the formulation of policies.