



## Meaning of the Pap smear for health students

Ananda C. Aguiar<sup>1</sup>, Layse L. R. Mendes<sup>1</sup>, Kayo H. J. F. Sousa<sup>2</sup>, Antonio L. Gomes Júnior<sup>1</sup>, Maria João J. Guerra<sup>3</sup>, Irene M. S. Oliveira<sup>3</sup>, Camila A. P. L. Almeida<sup>3\*</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>Centro Universitário UNINOVAFAPI. Teresina, PI, Brasil. <sup>2</sup>Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro. Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil. <sup>3</sup>Universidade Católica Portuguesa. Porto, Portugal.

### ABSTRACT

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#### OBJECTIVE

To describe the meanings of the Pap smear for health students.

#### METHODS

Descriptive study, qualitative approach, with 45 students from the health area of a Higher Education Institution, in the Northeast of Brazil. Data were collected in 2017, by means of interviews, processed in the IRaMuTeQ software, and pushed by the Descending Hierarchical Classification.

#### RESULTS

The students recognize that the education in health is the best strategy to prevent cervical cancer, as it is an essential tool in primary care and must be performed by health professionals.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The meanings found by the students revealed a concern with their role in the Pap smear and, therefore, considers it very important to improve their knowledge in this area so that they can provide quality care to women seeking to prevent cervical cancer.

#### DESCRIPTORS

Pap smear. Women's health. Cervical. Neoplasms. Health personal.

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#### Corresponding author:

Camila Aparecida Pinheiro Landim Almeida.  
Universidade Católica Portuguesa.  
Porto, Portugal.  
E-mail: clalmeida@porto.ucp.pt  
ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4843-4572>

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## INTRODUCTION

The advancement of the Pap smear is a landmark of great importance for the screening and prior identification of the cervical cancer. It is a non-invasive and amazingly simple, inexpensive, and satisfactory procedure granting the discovery of neoplastic cells, existing in the vaginal smear<sup>1</sup>.

Cervical Cancer of the Uterus (CCU), when diagnosed early, comes with a great possibility of cure. However, it has been considered a serious public health problem, being the second type of cancer that more affects women, being responsible for about 265 thousand deaths per year. The Papanicolaou still remains the best strategy used to diagnose the lesions, it is offered free of charge by the Unified Health System (SUS) to women aged 25 and 65 years<sup>2</sup>.

Brazil is considered a pioneer in the incorporation of the Pap smear, but there are still many barriers that diminish its accomplishment such as: shame, ignorance regarding the examination and the fear of this evidence the presence of some pathology and mainly the unpreparedness of the health professionals in to deal with women<sup>3</sup>.

According to Rocha et al.<sup>4</sup>, pap smears should be accessible to women who have already started their sex life. For Public Health, the control of CCU reflects one of the major concerns, because it is a world-class pathology, even with a high recovery capacity if detected early.

In the study carried out by Sousa and Monteiro<sup>5</sup>, most women recognize the importance of performing the Pap smear as a way to prevent several diseases, amongst them, the CCU, although some women report that as a uncomfortable procedure and also there is exposure to female intimacy. Thus, these feelings create barriers that impede prevention and compromise the realization of preventive, being extremely important the awareness and understanding by health professionals.

In this sense, it is recognized the importance of the primary care professionals to act directly in the promotion, prevention and health education of the population, considering the lack of knowledge of women about the HPV infection, which can lead to neoplastic lesions and CCU, the factors of noncompliance with the preventive examination and the increase in the prevalence and incidence of CCU, which have a relevant impact on Public Health<sup>6</sup>.

Considering that present CCU with high prevalence and international and national incidence, being susceptible to detection and early treatment, it becomes relevant to investigate the training and knowledge about the Pap smear as an important ally in the prevention and screening of CCU. Thus, this study aimed to describe the meanings of the Pap smear for health students.

## METHODS

This is a qualitative study carried out in a Higher Education Institution (HEI), in the Northeast of Brazil.

The participants of this research were the undergraduate students in Medicine, Biomedicine and Nursing courses who have completed the subjects of Gynecology (7th term), Cytopathology (6th term) and Women's Health (5th term), respectively, in the selected center. The participants were selected because they were the three courses in the Health area (Medicine, Biomedicine and Nursing) of the selected center in which a more specific approach in the curricular matrix on the technique of the Pap test takes place, with the prevention of cancer of the cervix, and health education.

As a criterion for inclusion, it was established the undergraduate students in Medicine, Biomedicine and Nursing, who completed the disciplines of Gynecology, Cytopathology and Women's Health, respectively, to make themselves available to

the procedures and period of data collection (August and September 2017), after clarification of all stages of the research. As a criterion of exclusion, the students who were on health leave during the period of data collection. The number of students participating in this study was not previously established due to the nature of the qualitative approach, which seeks to address the depth of the meanings present in the speeches, the recidivism and saturation of the information collected.

To obtain the data, interviews were conducted in classrooms at the Institution. These interviews were transcribed in full and guided through a semi-structured script composed of three questions to meet the objective of this research. In addition, to characterize the participants, a form was applied to collect sociodemographic aspects.

For the analysis, the recorded audios obtained during the interviews were transcribed in a text file for the elaboration of the corpus. For the processing, the software IRaMuTeQ (*Interface of Routles Analyzes Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires*) was used, using the method of the Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC), in which the units of elemental context and the words were crossed. From the sizing of the corpus the word classes were created, these were interpreted by their profiles, which were characterized by specific symbols correlated statistically and independently, obtaining a stable and definitive classification.

## RESULTS

Out of the 45 students interviewed in the medical, biomedicine and nursing courses, the age range from 20 to 29 years prevailed, the majority of which were brown, 37 female, unmarried, with a family income between one and four minimum wages and originated from others cities of Brazil.

IRaMuTeQ made the lexical recognition and separation of the corpus in 44 text units from 181 text segments, with 6323 records of occurrences and use of 85.08% of the total corpus. By means of the DHC, analyzes of the lexical domains were obtained. From the processing, the division took place in two thematic axes.

From the first axis, Class 6 originated, obtaining the highest percentage of repetitions, titled: "Experienced feelings in the gynecological consultation", branched into a subdivision represented by Class 5, which was denominated: "Failure to perform the exam leads to advanced cancer discovery". Class 5 branched into 2 subdivisions in Classes 4 and 2, entitled: "Early identification of malignant lesions by means of Papanicolaou" and "Importance of prevention of CCU", respectively. From the second axis, Classes 1 and 3 originated from the second partition of the corpus, entitled: "The role of health professionals to inform the population about the important exam" and "Intervention through lectures and educational campaigns", respectively.

In class 6, the participants revealed that the biggest feelings reported is the embarrassment, for not being comfortable with the health professional. There is still the fear of discovering some STD or even malignant lesions such as cancer and the discomfort of having to undergo the gynecological position.

*The main factor is the embarrassment, many women fail to perform the exam because they do not feel comfortable being there with the health professional (A8).*

*The fear of having a positive diagnosis in the exam justifies the woman performing the procedure but does not return to get the result (A14).*

In this context, Class 5, respondents declare that the consequences of not performing the Pap test may be related to a lack of symptoms. The late diagnosis of HPV and even cancer

lesions may be related to the lack of adherence of women to the examination, this reflects in the high mortality rates, because when discovered to an advanced degree, drug therapy will not always respond to treatment, and even a hysterectomy is required.

*The question of the consequences of non-achievement is that if they acquire some virus, such as HPV and that when untreated can evolve into other lesions even cervical cancer (A16).*

*The consequences of not performing are the diseases that can evolve; when they do not take care, they can thus have bigger complications (A18).*

In Class 4, deponents conceptualized that the Pap smear is usually done at the gynecological examination, it is simple and inexpensive, and it evaluates the cells of the epithelium of the uterus of the woman, through the scraping of these cells. It is of extreme importance for the prevention of various types of infections, and even the diagnosis of more complex pathologies, such as CCU.

*The Pap smear is a gynecological exam, and it is done to screen for potentially malignant lesions of cervical cancer. It is a relatively simple and accessible method to the population (A39).*

*It is a prevention test for the woman to know if she has any infection (A42).*

Thus, Class 2, the participants reported that it is essential to identify this cancer early, since it is very prevalent and is responsible for the high incidence of mortality among women. When the diagnosis is made early, the chances of curing this cancer increase, so the Pap test remains the key tool to prevent CCU.

*Cervical cancer today is one of the cancers that most devastate the female population (A7).*

*Early identification of the cause of injuries can be essential to prevent cancer (A40).*

In Class 1, the interviewees affirm that the health professional must be in direct contact with the women in the health units, guiding and clarifying doubts about the exam, and it is also necessary that there is a cordial and humanized service.

*As a future professional, I must strive for women to understand what the exam is, showing what the benefits are of taking it (A20).*

*I can intervene, showing that it is a simple, routine exam, and talk about periodicity also because there is a woman who thinks that she only needs to do it once in her life (A24).*

In Class 3, most participants reported that educational campaigns and lectures should be carried out in all spheres of society such as: neighborhoods and suburbs, hospitals and academia. These educational campaigns should emphasize the importance of taking the exam periodically.

*Through educational campaigns or lectures for both adolescents and adult women so that they develop this understanding of the importance of how high are the rates of cancer in the cervix and how this simple examination can decrease these levels of cancer and also treat how much before those that are positive (A4).*

*Failure to perform the Pap smear is an issue that must be addressed with the best publicity, awareness, both within the academic environment and in society as well as in hospitals, because there are not many strong incentives for the examination (A15).*

## DISCUSSION

As evidenced in the scientific literature and corroborating with the results of the research, the Papanicolaou is considered a preventive examination of CCU, which has been used for more than 40 years<sup>7</sup>.

Papanicolaou is a widely used screening program and is available free of charge. It has low cost, is fast, present high specificity and accuracy in relation to the diagnosis of CCU. In Brazil, this preventive procedure is carried out by women and influenced by several factors: age, socioeconomic status, and health services particularities<sup>8</sup>.

In this way, the results presented on the accomplishment of the Papanicolaou, by Giustina et al.<sup>9</sup> showed that the cervical cancer is a disease with slow evolution, therefore it is easy to detect changes early during the preventive exam.

The CCU is the third most common pathology in women, with no clinical manifestations. In the advanced stage when cancer becomes invasive, it is quite common for women to report having discharge, pain and in some cases even vaginal bleeding. After it's the discovery a sequence of procedures begins, through the diagnostic confirmation and the treatment, however the cases continue to grow a lot, because about 530 thousand women can develop this cancer every year in the world, and around of 275,000 can die<sup>10</sup>.

In agreement with the results presented in this research, the risk factors for CCU may be related to a number of issues such as: genetic factors, sexually transmitted diseases, mainly those caused by HPV, multiple partners, use of oral contraceptives for prolonged periods<sup>11</sup>.

Nowadays, screening programs for CCU are important because they can reduce up to 80% of the cases of death caused by this pathology, but there is still a part of the female population that does not perform it. According to data from the Ministry of Health, 40% of Brazilian women never underwent the exam, constituting only about 30% performed at least three times in their lifetime<sup>12</sup>.

Currently Brazil is considered the pioneer in performing the Pap smear, but it is possible to observe that there are still several factors that allow the low adherence of women to this exam, the main and lack of knowledge, taboos and mainly cultural issues and levels socioeconomic<sup>13</sup>.

According to the results presented, fear and shame are the main reasons for not performing the Papanicolaou, which for Silva et al.<sup>14</sup> are barriers that interfere directly or indirectly, since many women are afraid of body exposure and to the touch. The feeling of fear and pain are related to bad experiences experienced in other procedures, making women not seek so often.

According to Almeida et al.<sup>15</sup> women with low schooling and income tend not to perform the preventive and thus are more susceptible to CCU because they do not understand the exam and the difficulties found in the health care, so this part of the female population find many barriers to the preventive examination. The lack of understanding of women results in the low awareness of the female population about the significance and importance of the Pap smear, as well as restricted access to health care<sup>6</sup>.

At the present time it is very common to still have a certain resistance of the women in conforming to the examination due to the cultural values, since there is still a certain prejudice on the part of the women themselves to perform the exam and taboos like the fear and shame, thus making difficult the work of health professionals in the prevention and diagnosis of diseases<sup>16</sup>.

As shown in the results presented, the provision of health services is also a reason for not doing so, since according to the study by Silva et al.<sup>14</sup>, many women and health profession-

als themselves report that there should be an improvement in these services, with a more humanized care, a quality infrastructure and especially the adaptation of the more flexible hours so that they can perform the Pap smear.

According to the presented results, the academics reported that health education and the best strategy to anticipate CCU and thus are essential tools in primary care and should be performed by health professionals<sup>17</sup>.

The actions of health promotion are very relevant to prevent CCU, since from these it is possible to guide and advise women on the importance of performing the Pap smear and also make women feel more motivated to practice self-care and thus increasing the number of female followers to preventive<sup>18</sup>.

In health promotion and health campaigns health professionals should seek to provide a brief and clear overview of uterine cancer prevention, as an example through playful activities that guarantee the expectant to assimilate past information in a simple way, false "knowledge about the subject"<sup>19</sup>.

According to the results, the relationship between the professional and the patient is extremely important so that they can create affective bonds, so that they can trust the professional, being comfortable for dialogue and breaking the taboos that surround women. These links help a lot to collaborate with the health education processes, due to the greater adhesion of women to the preventive<sup>20</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

From the perspective of the researched scholars, it was possible to verify that the participants self-declared that the Pap test is important for the prevention and early treatment of CCU, a pathology that is responsible for high levels of mortality among women.

Regarding the relationship between the health professional and the patient, the interviewees emphasized that it is essential to create bonds so that there is a relationship of trust, being patient to dialogue and minimizing the myths that permeate women about the achievement of the Pap smear and the educational practices related to self-care.

The results presented and discussed should be considered from the perspective of some methodological limitations: because it is a transversal research, the ideas of the classes named and processed by the IraMuTeQ software can be modified over time, as the interventions and strategies are implemented; and for conducting the research in a single University Center located in a local reality of the Northeastern Region of Brazil.

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