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Baths, Works and Shackles: the Treatment of the Alienated in the 19th Century

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Introduction

The hospital environment in Portugal, during the nineteenth century, was marked by several routines, in compliance with standards and tasks performed by those who practiced the assistance. At the time, nurses were submitted to a strict hierarchy and their private lives merged with the daily life of the institutions where they worked. In the different hospital contexts that sheltered the alienated, the duties and functions attributed to nurses were clearly defined, and indicated a continuous and close relationship with the persons who were hospitalized.

Objectives

With the study that we propose to carry out, we intend, fundamentally, analyze the different treatments that constituted the therapeutic process of the alienated in the nineteenth century and present the nurses' responsibilities in this process.

Materials & Methods

This work results from a research based on historical methodology, where the documental research and the documental analysis are the preferential methods. The sources used are: "Medicina Domestica ou Tractado de Prevenir, e Curar as Enfermidades Com o Regimento, e Medicamentos simples", from 1825; "Dos Estabelecimentos de Alienados nos Estados Principais da Europa", from 1844; "Regulamento Geral do Hospital de Alienados do Conde de Ferreira", from 1883; and "Prontuario del Enfermero", from 1891.

Results

In the nineteenth century, the therapeutic process of the alienated was developed, mainly, by the control of symptoms and behavior. This control consisted in treatments based on means of repression and containment, ergotherapy, baths, nourishment and administration of drugs. The solitude rooms, shackles or the straightjackets, were some of the means of repression and restraint used; ergotherapy consisted on a treatment developed by work and occupation; baths, hot and cold, or with mineral additives, were mainly used to control manias or agitated behaviors; the suppression of food, which was adequate to the social condition of the alienated, would often be used as a form of punishment; and the drugs, frequently prescribed and administered experimentally, include, for example, veronal, lead iodide or lavender. Nurses, who habitually lived in the institutions where they worked, were involved in the hospital routines, performing surveillance functions or taking care of the hygiene of the alienated and spaces, managing and maintaining patient's activities, promoting their autonomy, or preparing and administering the baths, food and medicines. Being a nurse implied a sense of obedience, calling and self-denial, with the obligation of taking care of the alienated with patience, affection and tranquility.

Conclusion

To be alienated in the nineteenth century meant the transgression of the precepts of normality, bounded by bourgeois rules and habits, then dominant. Nurses were an integral part of the structures that accompanied the alienated, being those who, probably, spent more time with the patients, establishing close bonds and assuming a central responsibility in the application of the treatments.

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