

# Assessment of Nursing Roles in the Context of Access to Right to Health in the Pandemia Process: Traditional Review

## Pandemi Sürecinde Sağlık Hakkına Erişim Bağlamında Hemşirelik Rollerinin Değerlendirilmesi: Geleneksel Derleme

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**ABSTRACT** The right to health is one of the human rights that aims to protect and develop the person's personality in all aspects by accepting the human being as the most valuable asset of life. It is vital that all people have access to this fundamental right, regardless of religion, language, race, political opinion, belief, economic or social status. The most important worldwide social goal should be keeping health standards at the best possible level. In some cases, it is seen that this purpose is not followed, and negativities in access to the right to health and unethical behaviors may be experienced. The pandemic process has also brought about various problems in accessing the right to health. Nurses take responsibility for the enhancement and protection of the health of the individual, family, and society, curing in case of illness and increasing the quality of life. Hence, any event that affects the health and well-being of the individual and society adversely is closely associated with the nursing profession. Nurses work in close contact with the patient during the pandemic as in the pre-pandemic period, and they are at the forefront in the fight against the pandemic. Nurses also play a key role in people's access to the right to health. It can be stated in the context of access to health care services during the pandemic that especially advocacy roles of nurses come to the forefront. This study aims to discuss how the pandemic process affects access to the right to health and the roles of nurses in achieving the right to health. The work is a theoretical reflection based on scientific literature.

**Keywords:** Right to health; pandemic process; nursing roles

**ÖZET** Sağlık hakkı, insanı yaşamın en değerli varlığı olarak kabul ederek, kişinin kişiliğini her yönüyle korumayı ve geliştirmeyi amaçlayan insan haklarından biridir. Din, dil, ırk, siyasi görüş, inanç, ekonomik veya sosyal statü ne olursa olsun, tüm insanların bu temel hakka erişmesi hayati önem taşımaktadır. Dünya çapında en önemli sosyal hedef, sağlık standartlarını mümkün olan en iyi seviyede tutmak olmalıdır. Bazı durumlarda, bu amaca uyulmadığı ve sağlık hakkına erişimde olumsuzluklar ve etik olmayan davranışlar yaşanabileceği görülmektedir. Pandemi süreci de sağlık hakkına erişim konusunda olumsuzlukları beraberinde getirmiştir. Hemşireler; bireyin, ailenin ve toplumun sağlığının iyileştirilmesi ve korunması, hastalık durumunda tedavi edilmesi ve yaşam kalitesinin artırılması için sorumluluk alırlar. Bu nedenle bireyin ve toplumun, sağlığını ve refahını olumsuz yönde etkileyen herhangi bir olay hemşirelik mesleği ile yakından ilişkilidir. Hemşireler, pandemi öncesi dönemde olduğu gibi pandemi sırasında hastayla yakın temas hâlinde çalışırlar ve pandemiye karşı mücadelede ön saflarda bulunurlar. Hemşireler, kişilerin sağlık hakkına erişiminde de kilit rol oynamaktadırlar. Pandemi sürecinde sağlık hizmetlerine erişim bağlamında hemşirelerin özellikle savunucu rollerinin ön plana çıktığı söylenebilir. Bu çalışma, pandemi sürecinin sağlık hakkına erişimi nasıl etkilediğini ve hemşirelerin sağlık hakkına ulaşmadaki rollerinin önemini tartışmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışma, bilimsel literatüre dayanan teorik bir yansımadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Sağlık hakkı; pandemi süreci; hemşirelik rolleri

The right to health is one of the human rights that aim to protect and develop the person's personality in all aspects by accepting the human being as the most valuable asset of life. "It is the ability of a person to ask the society and the state to protect

his/her health, to be treated and cured when necessary, and to benefit from the opportunities provided by the society to continuously enhance his/her health".<sup>1</sup> The right to health encompasses a wide spectrum, including access to safe and potable water

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resources, adequate and safe food, nutrition, meeting housing needs, environmental health, sexual and reproductive health, and health education.<sup>2,3</sup>

The right to health was first stated in the World Health Organization Statute in 1946 as the right to reach the highest possible health standard. Later, in the International Conference on Primary Health Care Services held in Alma Ata in 1978, it was underscored that health is one of the basic human rights and that providing this right for everyone at the best possible level is one of the important social goals. In 1998, it was restated in the World Health Declaration announced by the World Health Assembly and was included in many international and regional human rights documents.<sup>3,4</sup>

The right to health requires access to health care when needed. Health care services are “services for the elimination of various factors that harm human health and protection of the society from the effects of these factors, treatment of patients, and rehabilitation of those with reduced physical and mental abilities and skills.”<sup>1</sup> The rights that people benefit while receiving these services are termed as “patient rights”. Patient rights “are whole of the rights people have as a” human “in their relationships with those who help them to regain their lost health and provide health care services.” These rights are guaranteed in numerous conventions and declarations, notably in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Constitution.

It is highlighted in the Articles 2 and 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that “everyone has the right to an appropriate standard of living that will ensure his health and well-being and can benefit from this right without any discrimination such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or any other opinion, national or social origin, wealth, birth, or any other status.”<sup>5</sup> Article 56 of the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey states that “Everyone has the right to live in a healthy and balanced environment. It shall be regulated by the state to plan and serve health institutions from a single source in order to ensure everyone to live their lives in physical and mental health and to realize cooperation by increasing human and material power and efficiency.”<sup>6</sup>

It is noticed that in all documents prepared at the national and international level, the right to health and in this regard, the principles of justice and equality are emphasized. Everyone has the right to benefit from health care services within the framework of justice and equality principles, regardless of race, language, religion and culture, age, sex, economic and social status. Under this right, states have an obligation to provide health care services accessible to all members of society. As required by this obligation, states should regulate their health policies in a way that does not hinder access to health care services, does not lead to inequalities in health, on the contrary, eliminates inequalities. Thus, it is crucial to make short, medium, and long-term planning and to be prepared for situations that would hinder or adversely impact access to the right to health. Access to health-care is a right that creates a public responsibility and should be fulfilled by the state without considering economic concerns.<sup>7</sup> In this article, the period of pandemic, which encompasses drawbacks in accessing the right to health, and the roles of nurses, in the context of accessing the right to health, will be discussed.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### THE PERIOD OF PANDEMIC AND THE RIGHT TO HEALTH

The coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) outbreak, which broke out in the Wuhan province of China in December 2019, has become a global problem as a result of its rapid spread between countries and has been declared as a “pandemic” by the World Health Organization (WHO). This pandemic, to which countries were caught unprepared, brought with it many medical, social, professional, political, economic, and ethical problems.<sup>8</sup>

In the events, such as pandemics, access to the right to health might encounter obstacles when the resources needed in health care services are limited.<sup>9</sup> During the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of people caught with the virus increased significantly due to the rapid spread of the virus and the delay in taking the necessary measures. In the face of this increase, health systems were inadequate due to the fact that resources needed in health care services

were limited.<sup>10</sup> Albeit there are differences between countries, in general terms, it can be stated that health systems are caught unprepared for this increase and challenges have been experienced in accessing and providing health care services. It is noticed that even in developed countries, problems have been experienced in managing the pandemic, pandemic strained the health systems and led them to seek rapid solutions.

The goal of health systems in pandemic management should be to prevent the health system from being exposed to more burden than it can deal with, and on the other hand, not to cause injustice in accessing the right to health, while ensuring this.<sup>10</sup> Lack of sufficient health care staff and sufficient health care resources against the increase in the number of uncontrollable patients during the pandemic that we have been experiencing caused a problem in the distribution of available resources and limited resources and raised ethical issues regarding the right to health. On the one hand, people waiting in line for hospitalization and health care, on the other hand, health care staff who do not have enough health care resources and who try to provide health care services with their heart. This process brought with it challenging ethical dilemmas and health care staff had to choose between patients. Ethical dilemmas about according to whom and what this choice will be made even lead to the deprivation of the right to access health care, which is an integral part of the right to live. The negativities experienced throughout this period appeared on the media coverages from time to time, unveiled the problems experienced in accessing health care services and accessing the right to health. We had to follow the disadvantages and discrimination experienced by the elderly and people with low socioeconomic levels in access to healthcare services, and how they were deprived of their right to health, which is one of their most fundamental rights, from the footages broadcasted in the media. In an ethical sense, the priority of healthcare professionals is to provide an equal health care service to all patients. However, in general terms, it is seen that challenges have been experienced in prioritizing patients throughout pandemic due to limited resources.<sup>10</sup> Bambi et al. stated in their study that, as a result of the

increasing demand for intensive care beds due to the pandemic, some crises were experienced in the admission of patients to intensive care, and employees had to set a priority in this regard.<sup>11</sup>

It would not be inaccurate to state that the pandemic process has impacted many sectors profoundly but has the greatest impact on the health sector. In particular, the current transformation of health care services as a health sector and the fact that health has become a commercial concept is a considerable factor in experiencing these problems. Pharmaceutical companies are among the largest companies across the world, and the number of companies with health-care enterprises is increasing every day. Health expenditures constitute the largest expenditure item of the countries. While the purpose of these expenditures is to ensure that people receive better health care services, the healthcare community, where a commercial concern such as “the more patients, the more earnings”, “to serve as much as its return” has begun to dominate, has started to move away from the goal of planning and carrying out services for “getting better health care services”.<sup>12</sup> This situation leads to the emergence of an understanding of health care as much as your money. It is an upsetting outcome of this understanding that people who do not have economic power lost their lives due to the inability to receive health care services during the period of pandemic. The cruciality of planning and running the healthcare system without commercial concerns and providing equal and fair health care services to everyone is clearly seen in this period. Moreover, in some countries, although millions of doses of vaccines are provided, the lack of access to a sufficient number of vaccines in many others can be considered as a tragic example of the transformation of health care services into a health sector as well as the example of an unfair and unequal distribution.

## ROLES OF NURSES IN ACCESS TO RIGHT TO HEALTH

Nursing is “a health discipline consisting of science and art responsible for planning, organizing, performing, and assessing nursing services to protect, enhance and curing the health and well-being of the individual, family and society in case of illness, and

their education”.<sup>13</sup> Nurses take responsibility for the enhancement and protection of the health of the individual, family, and society, curing in case of illness and increasing the quality of life.<sup>14</sup> Hence, every situation that impacts the health and well-being of the individual and society adversely is closely associated with the nursing profession.

Nurses take an active role in both preventive and curative health care services. They continue to perform their duties in line with their roles such as education, consultancy, research, management, quality improvement, cooperation, advocacy, and communication in all circumstances.<sup>2</sup> Nurses work in close contact with the patient during the period of pandemic as in the pre-pandemic period, and they are at the forefront in the fight against the pandemic. In this period, they work devotedly to protect the health of patients and save their lives and fulfill their duties by keeping their own safety of life in the background.<sup>15</sup>

In the historical process, it is seen that the most important projects and initiatives in eliminating inequality in health were performed by making home visits. Nowadays, nursing has turned into a profession that takes social responsibilities by focusing on health rather than illness, which is applied not only in hospitals but also in various settings such as schools and workplaces. During the period of pandemic, nurses take active roles in contact tracing (filiation) teams and family health centers as well as in hospitals. They perform the activities of testing, treatment, and vaccination by making home visits. Hence, they are in close contact not only with patients in hospitals but also with people who are likely to be affected by the pandemic in society. Plus, thanks to their roles that they play in ensuring patients' access to healthcare, they undertake crucial tasks.

Nurses also play a key role in people's access to the right to health. It can be stated in the context of access to health care services during the period of pandemic that especially advocacy roles of nurses come to the forefront. It is seen that the International Council of Nurses (ICN) and WHO have drawn attention to the significance of nurses in the context of access to the right to health with their themes in recent years.<sup>16</sup> In the 2018 theme, ICN highlights the

need for everyone to live in healthy conditions, to ensure their access to healthcare services, and the importance of nurses in this regard by stating “Health is a human right and nurses can be a leading voice in this issue”. Moreover, by setting the 2020 theme as “Nurses a Leading Voice in World Health”, ICN draws attention to the fact that nurses are at the forefront in the fight against the pandemic. Furthermore, the declaration of the year 2020 as the “Year of Nurses and Midwives” by WHO can be considered as another emphasis on the importance and necessity of nursing in health care. All these and the outstanding efforts of nurses in accessing health services are a reflection of the advocacy role from their nursing role.

Extraordinary situations such as outbreaks can further deepen existing inequalities in access to the right to health. In the pandemic process we are experiencing, it is crucial to ensure that the existing inequalities are reduced rather than exacerbated by considering the vulnerable groups in the context of the right to health. Likewise, populations that are disproportionately exposed to the risk must be taken into account. These groups, which are generally termed as ‘vulnerable populations’, involve not only the elderly, the disabled, the unhealthy individuals, but also those from any socioeconomic group who has difficulty in coping with the pandemic mentally, physically, or financially.<sup>17</sup> For instance, homeless people may suffer disproportionately during the period of pandemic due to unsanitary living conditions, and displaced individuals such as refugees and migrants may suffer due to fewer employment opportunities during this period.<sup>7</sup> Nurses have an important position due to their advocacy role in protecting these groups against discrimination and inequality in providing health care services.

Nurses have important responsibilities in terms of bringing the pandemic under control. Bringing the pandemic under control can be achieved through raising the awareness of the society and following the rules as a society. In this regard, nurses should be able to take an active role in raising the awareness of the society and informing the society about the effectiveness of compliance with the rules regarding the usage of the face masks, hygiene rules, and main-

taining social distancing, in the light of their trainer and consultant roles. It is especially important to keep the immune system robust in order not to be caught in the COVID-19 disease, to survive with the least damage when caught, and having an adequate and balanced nutrition for this. Nurses should raise the awareness of both the society and the patients receiving treatment in the hospital about this issue. At the same time, they should plan research and follow up the research to maintain providing quality nursing care and health care service during the period of pandemics due to their role as researchers.

Vaccination is an important factor to eradicate the pandemic. During pandemics, free access to treatment and vaccines should be provided, priority planning should be made based on the risk groups considering vulnerable populations, and vaccination should be provided within these plans. Nurses should use both their educator and advocacy roles also during the vaccination process and take an active role to eradicate the pandemic.

Nursing is an occupational group among health professionals that is in more contact with sick or healthy individuals and their families. They have the opportunity to observe and experience the experiences and feelings of the people they are in contact with. By communicating observations and experiences of nurses to policymakers and collaborating with the necessary sectors, there is a potential to improve health care systems and ensure that communities reach a high standard of health. It is thought that transferring the experiences, which were experienced throughout the pandemic due to their quality development, cooperation, communication, and management roles, would be important in determining the policies. Thus, it is considered important that nurses should take part in decision boards established during the period of pandemics.

## CONCLUSION

The pandemic has shown, and continues to show, how prepared countries are for emergencies concerning health. The right to health is a concept that should be protected also in extraordinary situations such as

a pandemic, at every stage from planning to execution of health care services. Because this concept is based on protecting and maintaining the life of the human being, who is considered as the most valuable asset of existence. While the right to health, which should be given to everyone fairly and equally, is guaranteed by the state, it also places responsibilities on healthcare professionals. Particularly, extraordinary situations such as the pandemic we are experiencing may lead to hardships in terms of access to health care services and the right to health. At this point, nurses are in an important position, specifically thanks to their advocacy roles. Moreover, thanks to their advisory and educational roles in public awareness, which is important in fighting against the pandemic, they could actively take part in the determination of health care policies for the pandemic through their roles in quality development, cooperation, and communication as well as their roles as being researcher and manager.

Our study is important in terms of revealing the roles of nursing in the context of access to health during the pandemic. There is a need for qualitative studies that reveal the professional experiences of nurses on the subject. At the same time, it is important to support and strengthen the roles of nurses with effective training contents in order for nurses to be strong fighters of the health armies in the next generation diseases.

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### *Conflict of Interest*

*No conflicts of interest between the authors and / or family members of the scientific and medical committee members or members of the potential conflicts of interest, counseling, expertise, working conditions, share holding and similar situations in any firm.*

### *Authorship Contributions*

*All authors contributed equally while this study preparing.*

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