The importance of professional nursing competence for the safety and quality of healthcare systems: a descriptive research among Slovenian nurses

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Background
Global challenges, including the rapid development and complexity of healthcare systems, require nurses to have a high level of competency in order to provide high quality and safe care. This has been particularly evident since the COVID -19 epidemic, where nurses work in exceptional circumstances and where competent care also means exposing themselves to increased risk.

Research Question / Aim
The aim of the study was to examine the self-reported professional competence among Slovenian nurses during the first wave of COVID -19.

Method / Procedure
The study has a descriptive-quantitative cross-sectional design. The sample consisted of 425 registered nurses employed at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of healthcare and social care institutions of whom 75 (17.6%) were male and 350 (82.4) female. Their average age was 34.3 years (SD =±10.9) and their average length of service was 14.4 years (SD =±11.6). The data collection was carried out online with a Slovenian version of the Nurse Professional Competence (NPC-SF) scale between April and July 2020. In addition to a univariate analysis, a confirmatory factor analysis was performed.

Results
Nurses rated their ability to show concern and respect for the patient autonomy, integrity and dignity as the highest (6.24±0.9) and their ability to supervise and train co-workers/staff as the lowest (5.21±1.4). Confirmatory factor analysis resulted in four-factor model explaining 65% variance in comparison to the original six-factor model that explained 53.6% of the total variance. The prevailing first factor revolved around leadership and management of nursing care. All four factors showed Cronbach's alpha values of > 0.9.

Discussion
The development and maintenance of competence is an on-going concern for all nurses, healthcare organisations and of course patients. The results showed that nurses professional competences were challenged the most during COVID-19 in nursing homes since they were not designed to be a hospital-like environment and are very much understaffed. In addition, nurses' competencies were in the first wave of COVID-19 focused around the coordination of care, related roles and responsibilities.

Conclusion
The concept of nursing competence remains a central tenant of the scope of nursing practice, with the underlying premise that patients are entitled to high-quality care from competent nurses. The study provides evidence for the importance of professional nursing competence in times of natural disasters. Further studies are needed to determine additional relationships with the level of nursing competence and patient outcomes.