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The eminent nurse educator Circe de Melo Ribeiro: a biographical study

A eminente enfermeira educadora Circe de Melo Ribeiro: um estudo biográfico

La eminente enfermera educadora Circe de Melo Ribeiro: un estudio biográfico

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To describe the life trajectory of the nurse from São Paulo, Circe de Melo Ribeiro, in higher education in nursing and in the management of a Brazilian nursing association. **Methodology:** This is a historical and biographical study, constructed from documents and photographs. The data were collected in 2024, from publicly available sources. The analysis followed the Biographic Narrative Interpretative Method. **Results:** The study highlights the subject's virtues, influences, choices, perceptions, education with four degrees, published articles and performance in the five dimensions of the professional role of nursing: hospital care, teaching in higher education, nursing research, management and political participation in a Brazilian nursing association. **Final considerations:** Circe de Melo Ribeiro was a pioneer in the dissemination of concepts and principles of Nursing Administration and in the promotion of the empowerment of Brazilian nurses from the 1960s to the 1980s, through knowledge and critical reflection of professional practice.

Descriptors: History of Nursing; Biography; Nurses; Schools, Nursing; Practice Management; Societies.

RESUMO

Objetivo: Descrever a trajetória de vida da enfermeira paulista Circe de Melo Ribeiro no ensino superior de Enfermagem e na gestão de entidade de classe da enfermagem brasileira. **Método:** O estudo é histórico documental biográfico, construído a partir de documentos e fotografias. Os dados foram coletados em 2024, em fontes de acesso público. A análise seguiu o Método Interpretativo Narrativo Biográfico. **Resultados:** O estudo destaca as virtudes da biografada, influências, escolhas, percepções, formação em quatro diplomações, artigos publicados e atuação nas cinco dimensões do papel profissional de enfermagem: assistência hospitalar, docência no ensino superior, pesquisa em enfermagem, gestão e participação política em entidade de classe da enfermagem brasileira. **Considerações finais:** Circe de Melo Ribeiro foi pioneira na divulgação de conceitos e princípios de Administração em Enfermagem, e na promoção do empoderamento da enfermeira brasileira entre as décadas de 1960 e 1980, mediante conhecimento e reflexão crítica da prática profissional.

Descritores: História da Enfermagem; Biografia; Enfermeiras e Enfermeiros; Escolas de Enfermagem; Gerenciamento da Prática Profissional; Sociedades.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Describir la trayectoria de vida de la enfermera paulistana Circe de Melo Ribeiro en la formación superior en enfermería y en la gestión de una asociación profesional de enfermería brasileña. **Metodología:** El estudio es documental, histórico y biográfico, construido a partir de documentos y fotografías. Los datos se recopilieron en 2024, de fuentes de acceso público. El análisis siguió el Método Interpretativo Narrativo Biográfico. **Resultados:** El estudio destaca las virtudes, influencias, elecciones, percepciones, educación en cuatro grados, artículos publicados y desempeño del sujeto en las cinco dimensiones del papel profesional de enfermería: atención hospitalaria, enseñanza en la educación superior, investigación en enfermería, gestión y participación política en una asociación profesional de enfermería brasileña. **Consideraciones finales:** Circe de Melo Ribeiro fue pionera en la difusión de conceptos y principios de la Administración de Enfermería y en la promoción del empoderamiento de las enfermeras brasileñas entre las décadas de 1960 y 1980, a través del conocimiento y la reflexión crítica de la práctica profesional.

Descriptores: Historia de la Enfermería; Biografía; Enfermeras y Enfermeros; Facultades de Enfermería; Gestión de la Práctica Profesional; Sociedades.

INTRODUCTION

Since the early days of modern nursing in Brazil, professors of the History of Nursing discipline and members of the board of the *Associação Brasileira de Enfermagem* (ABEn Nacional, Brazilian Nursing Association) have been committed to preserving the memory of the profession by publishing the life stories of pioneering nurses and prominent leaders such as Anna Nery^(1,2), Rachel Haddock Lobo^(3,4), Edith de Magalhães Fraenkel^(5,6), among others. The initial biographical studies narrated their lives, education, and achievements without historical contextualization.

Nursing professionals' biographies gained new momentum starting in the 2000s, featuring nationally recognized figures as well as lesser-known individuals, all of whom made significant contributions to teaching and practice within their respective contexts. The published biographies highlighted professionals of all genders, races, (white / black), both secular and religious⁽⁷⁻¹⁰⁾.

Several research groups and laboratories focused on the history of nursing and health have dedicated themselves to studying the biographies of professional figures. The Research Group on History, Bioethics, and Nursing Legislation at the *Escola de Enfermagem da Universidade de São Paulo* (EESUP, University of São Paulo School of Nursing) has been devoted to biographical studies and the publication of biographies and visual identities of historical Brazilian figures active in Minas Gerais, Paraná, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo⁽¹¹⁻²¹⁾.

The aforementioned biographical narratives highlight professional practice in care, teaching, research, leadership in nursing schools, and political management within professional nursing organizations in Brazil. They reveal intriguing facts about the history of nursing and previously unknown aspects of both personal and professional lives, serving as tools for learning and reflection on the diverse contexts of the profession's journey and professional identity.

Honoring and preserving the memory and scientific legacy of pioneers and predecessors is part of the professional commitment. With the aim of giving visibility to other historical figures in Brazilian nursing, Professor Circe de Melo Ribeiro was chosen to be the subject of a biography, based on the criterion of her being the pioneer of Nursing Administration in Brazil. She had a distinguished career as a faculty member at the *Escola de Enfermagem de Ribeirão Preto da Universidade de São Paulo* (EERP-USP, University of São Paulo at Ribeirão Preto College of Nursing) and at EEUSP, also being a prominent leader with significant involvement in ABEn *Nacional* and the São Paulo Section of ABEn (ABEn/SP). Despite her accomplishments, her life story had not yet been documented.

OBJECTIVE

Describe the life trajectory of the São Paulo nurse Circe de Melo Ribeiro in higher nursing education and in the leadership of professional nursing organizations in Brazil.

METHODS

Documentary biographical historical research, constructed through investigation, synthesis, and communication of events from the personal and professional life trajectory of the biographized individual⁽²²⁾.

The research settings included Itajubá/MG, São Paulo/SP, and Florianópolis/SC. Documentary and iconographic data were collected from January to December 2024. The sources consulted were the Ibero-American Nursing Historical-Cultural Center (CHCEIA) at EEUSP, the USP Production Repository, the EERP-USP website, an ABEn documentary, the *Revista Brasileira de Enfermagem* (REBEn, Brazilian Journal of Nursing), the *Revista da Escola de Enfermagem* at USP (REEUSP, Journal of School of Nursing – University of São Paulo), the journal *Enfermagem em Novas Dimensões* (REND, Nursing in New Dimensions), materials used in the construction of biographies of former presidents of ABEn *Nacional* developed for the Memorial Casa ABEn, and the genealogical literature book of the Melo Family⁽²³⁾. Contact was also established with a niece of the biographized individual.

Once the bibliographic material was gathered, a thorough reading of its contents was conducted, followed by the identification and selection of information relevant to the study. From the total number of images, the four most symbolic photographs representing the biographized individual's life journey were selected. After this survey, the data were organized to construct the biography of the honoree.

The data analysis followed the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM), developed by British historian and methodologist Tom Wengraf. This method was designed to study the historical, psychosocial, and biographical dynamics of individuals, capturing and examining the details, complexities, and vicissitudes of a historically shaped life, whose actions, decisions, and choices become intelligible through an understanding of the sociocultural and historical context in which personal experiences occurred⁽²⁴⁾.

The BNIM method consists of three phases: i) Biography – comprising the description of the entire life trajectory, including details and lived experiences. In this phase, the personal and professional events in the life of Circe de Melo Ribeiro were arranged in chronological order. ii) Narrative – consisting of the life story told by the individual studied, by people within her social circle, or extracted from published testimonies. In this phase, published accounts from colleagues were identified in the literature, along with the sociocultural variables that influenced her choices, such as family, religion, work, culture, and key figures. iii) Interpretative – involving the social interpretation of the meaning behind the actions in the life story of the individual studied. In this phase, the meanings of Circe de Melo Ribeiro's actions were interpreted in her roles as nurse, educator, researcher, and leader in both São Paulo and Brazilian nursing⁽²⁴⁾.

As this is a documentary study using publicly accessible sources, it was exempt from review by a Research Ethics Committee. The ethical principles of Resolution 510/2016 of the *Conselho Nacional de Saúde* (Brazilian National Health Council) were respected. Authorization for the use of images was requested from the relevant institutions and from the biographized individual's family.

RESULTS

The life story of Circe de Melo Ribeiro was outlined in six categories, as follows: i) family background, school and professional education (1926–1953); ii) faculty member at EERP-USP (1953–1962); iii) faculty member at EEUSP (1962–1978); iv) president of ABEn Nacional (decades of 1960 and 1980); v) president of ABEn/SP (1972–1975); vi) personality traits.

Family background, school and professional education (1926–1953)

The biographical timeline of Circe de Melo Ribeiro begins with her birth on November 23, 1926, in Itapeva, located in the southern region of the state of São Paulo. She was a white girl with brown eyes, born into a family that practiced the Christian Spiritist Doctrine of Kardecism. Her father, Theodomiro Ribeiro, was the director of a Spiritist Center and an employee of the Federal Tax Office. Her mother, Adelina de Melo Ribeiro, worked for the Meteorology Service. The couple had six children - two sons and four daughters.

Her paternal grandparents, Coronel Levino Fernandes Ribeiro and Olympia Ernestina Bueno de Campos, owned a small farm. Her grandfather was an Army officer, public school teacher, adult literacy educator, city councilman for the *Partido Republicano Paulista* (Paulista Republican Party), and public prosecutor. Newspaper articles published in Itapeva/SP highlighted his eloquence, patriotic stature, and status as a distinguished citizen who played a key role in the early development of the city and surrounding region.

Her maternal grandparents, Coronel Crescêncio Ferreira de Melo and Ana Bernardina Bueno Pimentel, were farmers dedicated to cattle ranching and coffee cultivation. Her maternal grandfather was also an Army officer, city councilman, deputy judge, politician, and founder and president of a Spiritist Center⁽²³⁾.

Circe de Melo Ribeiro completed her primary, secondary, and vocational education in her hometown. From 1934 to 1937, she attended primary school at *Grupo Escolar Acácio Piedade* (Acácio Piedade School). Between 1938 and 1942, she studied at the *Ginásio Oficial de Itapeva* (Itapeva's Official Middle School). In 1944, she earned her teaching diploma from the *Escola Normal Oficial de Itapeva* (Itapeva's Official School for Teachers' Formation). She worked as a primary school teacher for five years, from 1946 to 1950, in three different public schools⁽²⁵⁾.

In São Paulo's capital, she studied at the *Faculdade de Saúde Pública da USP* (FSP-USP, School of Public Health at the University of São Paulo), earning her diploma as a Public Health Educator in 1948. She was appointed as a Commissioned Primary Teacher and assigned to the EEUSP by the São Paulo Secretary of Education to pursue nursing studies, receiving her nursing diploma in 1953 (Figure 1). Her student life was marked by dedication and commitment to professional training, with no absences or leaves recorded in her academic file⁽²⁵⁾.



Figure 1 – Circe de Melo Ribeiro, nurse graduated in the *Escola de Enfermagem da Universidade de São Paulo* (EEUSP)

Source: EEUSP.

While studying nursing, Circe de Melo Ribeiro participated in the State Congress of Students and the 6th National Nursing Congress (CNE). After graduating, she took part in the 10th International Nursing Congress of the International Council of Nurses (ICN) and the 2nd Latin American Congress of the International Catholic Committee of Nurses and Doctors' Social Assistants (CICIAMS). Additionally, she attended meetings, seminars, Nursing Week, the *Jornada Brasileira de História da Enfermagem* (Brazilian Conference on the History of Nursing), and the *Congresso Brasileiro de Enfermagem* (CBEn, Brazilian Nursing Congress)⁽²⁵⁾.

From 1959 to 1960, as a Rockefeller Foundation scholarship recipient, she lived in the United States, where she completed postgraduate studies in Nursing Service Administration at the College of Nursing, Wayne University, in Detroit, and took an English Language Instruction course at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania⁽²⁵⁾.

Upon returning to Brazil, she earned a Bachelor's degree in Pedagogy from the Faculty of Philosophy, Sciences, and Letters at the *Universidade Católica de Campinas* (Catholic University of Campinas), graduating in 1961. In 1964, she completed a specialization course in Hospital Administration at the School of Public Health of USP (FSP-USP), as well as a Licentiate degree in Pedagogy at the Faculty of Sciences and Languages of USP. From 1953 to 1978, she served as a professor at USP, teaching in the nursing schools of Ribeirão Preto and São Paulo.

Faculty member at EERP-USP (1953–1962)

The EERP-USP was established by State Law No. 1,467, dated December 26, 1951. Its first director was nurse Glete de Alcântara, a graduate of the School of Nursing of Toronto, Canada. Teaching, research, and outreach activities began in 1953 under a semi-boarding system. The initial faculty consisted of four nurses, among them Circe de Melo Ribeiro, making her a pioneering professor at this higher education institution in nursing.

In August 1953, Circe de Melo Ribeiro was appointed to EERP-USP as a contracted additional staff member to carry out technical and teaching duties, serving as professor of the Nursing Administration and Surgical Center courses. She delivered the Inaugural Lecture for the 1956 Academic Year. From 1953 to 1961, she served as acting director during the official director's absences and was honored as the patroness of the 5th graduating class (Figure 2).



Figure 2 – Professor Circe de Melo Ribeiro, Patroness of the Class of 1961

Source: EERP-USP.

Figure 2 presents the official graduation photograph of the 1961 class of EERP-USP. At the top of the image, the name of the institution is displayed in white letters against a black background. On the left side, the school's visual identity or logo is visible, featuring the lit lamp - an emblem of the nursing profession. In the top row, on the left, stands Director Glete de Alcântara. On the right is Professor Circe de Melo Ribeiro, Patroness of the class. In the two lower rows are the 13 graduating students, including 11 laywomen and two nuns.

Still in Ribeirão Preto, Circe de Melo Ribeiro served as head nurse of the Surgical and Obstetric Clinic and directed the Surgical Center of the *Santa Casa de Misericórdia*. She was also director of the Nursing Service and the Support Care Service at the *Hospital das Clínicas*, organized the Surgical Center of the *Beneficência Portuguesa Hospital*, participated in student recruitment campaigns, and taught English at the *Associação de Cultura Brasil-Estados Unidos* (Brazil - United States Cultural Association)⁽²⁵⁾.

Faculty member at EEUSP (1962–1978)

The EEUSP was established by State Decree-Law No. 13.040, dated October 31, 1942. Its first director was nurse Edith de Magalhães Fraenkel, a graduate of the Philadelphia General School of Nurses in the United States.

In 1962, Circe de Melo Ribeiro returned to São Paulo's capital city following a request for her transfer between teaching units, submitted to the Rector of USP by then-director of EEUSP, Maria Rosa Sousa Pinheiro, a nurse trained in Canada. At the institution, Circe served as Assistant Professor in the undergraduate course in nursing, teaching the subject of Applied Administration in Nursing. She also supervised hospital internships and clinical instruction and contributed to the planning of theoretical and practical training programs. Simultaneously, she worked as Assistant to the Director of Nursing at the University Hospital of USP^(25–27).

Concurrently, she supervised the Medical Clinic Units at the *Hospital das Clínicas* of the Medical School of the University of São Paulo (HCFMUSP), within the 'In-Service' Education Program for Nurses. She taught the subject of Administration in the Intensive Nursing Course in Rehabilitation at the Orthopedic and Traumatology Clinic and also delivered a course on Principles of Administration at the *Hospital do Instituto de Aposentadoria e Pensões dos Empregados em Transportes e Cargas* (IAPTEC, Hospital of Institute of the Retiree for Transport and Freight Employees)^(25,27).

EEUSP has a longstanding tradition of university outreach, with projects carried out both in São Paulo's capital and interior regions. During the 1960s and 1970s, the institution was actively involved in combating endemic diseases. In 1967, the State Secretary of Health mobilized the school's faculty and students to assist the population of Igarapu do Tietê, affected by a typhoid fever epidemic. Circe de Melo Ribeiro, along with other professors and students, set up an emergency hospital in a local school building, where they provided nursing care to 180 patients over a period of 72 days. Faculty and students worked in rotating shifts to ensure their academic responsibilities in São Paulo were not compromised⁽²⁷⁾.

Another defining feature of EEUSP's identity is its collaboration with international organizations, including the Pan American Health Organization of the World Health Organization (PAHO/WHO), through advisory work carried out by faculty members in Portugal and Latin America. In 1960, Circe de Melo Ribeiro undertook professional activities in Europe. In 1962, she supervised an internship in Administration at the Faculty of Medical Sciences in Rosario, Argentina, and taught courses in Administration and Supervision at the School of Nursing in Asunción, Paraguay. In 1967, she conducted courses in Chile. In 1969, she worked as a consultant and taught Nursing Administration in Mexico and the Caribbean⁽²⁷⁾.

EEUSP also engages in cooperation with governmental entities at the federal, state, and municipal levels, and collaborates with healthcare institutions in other Brazilian states. In 1963, Circe de Melo Ribeiro provided consultancy services at the Ernesto Dornelles Hospital in Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul. In 1969, she served on the *Conselho Estadual de Saúde* (State Health Council). In 1974, she was Technical Advisor to the State Secretary of Health and contributed to the *Instituto Nacional do Seguro Social* (INSS, National Institute of Social Security) and the *Instituto Nacional de Assistência Médica da Previdência Social* (INAMPS, National Institute of Medical Assistance for Social Security). In 1975, she served as Technical Advisor to the Ministério da Saúde (Ministry of Health)^(25,27).

From 1965 to 1967, Circe de Melo Ribeiro was part of the advisory committee of the Ministry of Health for the training of Nursing Assistants. Alongside nurses Maria Rosa Sousa Pinheiro, Waleska Paixão, Isaura Barbosa Lima, and Haydée Guanais Dourado, she participated in the Commission of Experts in Nursing Education (CEEEnf), under the *Departamento de Assuntos Universitários do Ministério da Educação e Cultura* (DESU/MEC, Department of University Affairs of the Ministry of Education and Culture). This commission was responsible

for drafting the Ten-Year Plan for Nursing Development, aimed at improving nursing education - a document that was submitted to the Conselho Federal de Educação (Federal Council of Education)⁽²⁷⁾.

In 1968, she took part in organizing the National Seminar on the Undergraduate Nursing Curriculum, held at EEUSP. The central theme of the event was the study of curricular structure and the distribution of subjects and disciplines. The seminar brought together directors of nursing schools, course coordinators, faculty members, and heads of hospital and public health services from Brazil and Latin America⁽²⁷⁾. During the event, a formal request was submitted to the *Conselho Federal de Educação* to revise the undergraduate nursing curriculum, proposing the inclusion of a diversified fourth year.

The University Reform of 1968 led to the restructuring of higher education institutions in Brazil, resulting in EEUSP being organized into departments. The Department of Professional Guidance (ENO-EEUSP), established in 1970, selects undergraduate and graduate students interested in research in areas such as nursing management, bioethics and nursing ethics, nursing history and legislation, research methodology, education, and nursing licensure. The graduate program at the master's level, with a concentration in Nursing Fundamentals, was created in 1973 by Maria Rosa Sousa Pinheiro, Gleite de Alcântara, Wanda de Aguiar Horta, Anayde Correa de Carvalho, and Amália Correa de Carvalho. The doctoral program was launched in 1982⁽²⁷⁾.

Circe de Melo Ribeiro dedicated herself to earning the title of Doctor, aiming to advance in her academic career and meet the requirement for doctoral-level faculty to approve USP's graduate program. She became the first nursing professor at EEUSP to receive a doctoral degree. Her thesis, defended in 1972 in the Hospital Administration program at the School of Public Health of USP, was titled "*Patient Classification System as a Tool for Nursing Staff Allocation*" and was supervised by physician Odair Pacheco Pedroso. Her thesis research marked a historical milestone in Nursing Administration in Brazil by introducing patient classification and comprehensive nursing care⁽²⁷⁻²⁹⁾.

The results of her thesis provided essential data for calculating nursing staff requirements in Brazilian hospital institutions, highlighting the originality of her work. It also contributed significantly to the establishment of Nursing Auditing, which involves analyzing the activities performed by the nursing team in relation to patient care.

Circe de Melo Ribeiro was also part of the pioneering generation of nurse research advisors at EEUSP. In 1974, she organized the Graduate Program at the master's level in the concentration area of Nursing Services Administration within ENO-EEUSP, a field of study that was unprecedented in Brazil at the time. She was a trailblazer in advising master's dissertations and doctoral theses on the topic of Nursing Administration, now referred to as Nursing Management.

As a faculty member in both the master's and doctoral programs, she was responsible for course distribution and for making adjustments to the Graduate Program, such as implementing group activities in the practical component of the Nursing Administration course to meet the criteria established by *Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior* (CAPES, Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel). She actively promoted nursing research, believing it to be a key pathway for nurses to achieve professional autonomy and scientific recognition for nursing as a university-level profession.

Her doctoral thesis⁽²⁹⁾, along with the master's (M) and doctoral (D) advisements she conducted between 1978 and 1984, are archived in USP's scholarly repository. She supervised nine master's dissertations and one doctoral thesis, some of which were carried out as a volunteer professor after her retirement. Her advisees included: Paulina Kurcgant (M and D), Aracy Reis de Menezes (M), Ana Irma Rodrigues (M), Maria Inez Burini Chaccur (M), Margareth Angelo (M), Maria do Carmo Querido Avelar (M), Sandra da Silva Gomes de Oliveira (M), Regina Toshie Takahashi (M), and Maria Madalena Januário Leite (M). Three of them joined ENO-EEUSP and became leading figures in the field of Nursing Administration, contributing with scientific articles and textbooks^(30,31).

Regarding her scientific output (1955–1986), she authored 19 publications in Brazilian journals - REBEn (11), REEUSP (6), REND (1), and *Revista Paulista de Hospitais* (1) (São Paulo Journal of Hospitals) - as well as one international article published in the United States in collaboration with American nurses, discussing trends in Brazilian nursing. Additionally, REBEn includes her publications as president of ABEn *Nacional*, such as the President's Report, speeches at CBEn, and editorial pieces.

An analysis of her scientific production reveals that most of her articles were published individually. Her collaborative works involved nursing directors from HCFMUSP and three EEUSP faculty members: Gleite de Alcântara, Amália Corrêa de Carvalho, and Anayde Corrêa de Carvalho⁽²⁷⁾.

The 19 identified articles address pioneering themes in the field of Nursing Administration, such as supervision, auditing, planning, organization, training, recreation, evaluation, leadership, continuing education, staffing, and human relations in the workplace. These texts offer historical and philosophical retrospectives

on the new concepts introduced, revealing a critical and reflective perspective on professional training and practice. They highlight cultural differences between Brazilian and American nursing, express concern for the quality of care, and emphasize the need for research in education and practice, ongoing curriculum revision, and adherence to the Professional Code of Ethics.

When discussing quantitative and qualitative deficiencies in education and service, the articles propose actionable solutions, including the adaptation of foreign forms and manuals to meet Brazilian needs.

In the context of the 1960s, Brazilian nursing was carried out by Nursing Attendants, Nursing Assistants, and Nurses - the latter being the category with the most extensive professional training but the smallest representation in healthcare institutions. This imbalance negatively affected the quality of nursing care and deeply concerned Circe de Melo Ribeiro. In her articles, she documented the challenges of the professional landscape and outlined a series of recommended changes.

In her academic career at USP, Circe de Melo Ribeiro ascended through the ranks of higher education, serving as Instructor Professor, Assistant Teaching Professor, and Assistant Doctor Professor. In December 1978, she officially received her Retirement Title from the University Rectorate, following an invaluable academic career marked by nationally recognized contributions to the establishment and development of graduate education in nursing in Brazil. Even after retirement, she continued to collaborate with graduate programs and contributed actively to the production and dissemination of scientific knowledge in nursing.

President of ABEn Nacional (decades of 1960 and 1980)

ABEn was founded in 1926, with Edith de Magalhães Fraenkel as its first president, followed by Glete de Alcântara, Maria Rosa Sousa Pinheiro, Clarice Della Torre Ferrarini, and Circe de Melo Ribeiro⁽³²⁾.

Circe de Melo Ribeiro maintained a long-standing relationship with ABEn. She first joined the professional association in 1953. She served as National President of ABEn for three terms (1964–1966, 1966–1968, and 1980–1984). Upon her election in 1964, REBEn published her visual identity and *curriculum vitae*⁽²⁵⁾.

During her leadership of ABEn Nacional, she presided over nine editions of CBEn and represented the association at numerous national and international events. CBEn, established in 1947, held its first edition at EEUUSP under the direction of Edith de Magalhães Fraenkel, then president of ABEn/SP. It remains the largest scientific event in Brazilian nursing, fostering unity among different professional categories, promoting knowledge exchange, and shaping policies in nursing education and practice⁽³²⁾.

In 1962, under the presidency of Clarice Della Torre Ferrarini, ABEn's executive secretariat and the publication of its *Boletim Informativo* (BI, Informative Bulletin) were transferred to São Paulo. In 1964, upon assuming the presidency, Circe de Melo Ribeiro encountered a vacancy in the editorial services of the BI and appointed her youngest sister, Nise de Melo Ribeiro, as the association's clerk.

In her speeches as president, she consistently upheld moderation and respect, clearly expressing her views on Brazilian nursing and its challenges, as well as the association's social responsibility toward the profession, healthcare institutions, and Brazilian society⁽³²⁾.

During her first term (1964–1966), Circe de Melo Ribeiro stood out for her courage in assuming the presidency, her sense of responsibility in guiding the future of the association and Brazilian nursing, and her commitment to continuing the work of her predecessors. She recognized and emphasized the importance of ABEn's members in keeping the association active and vibrant. Her administration was marked by dedication, hard work, and collaboration with other board members, and together, through collective effort, they contributed to the advancement of the profession⁽²⁵⁾.

In meetings with the Brazilian nursing community, she clearly expressed her views on nurses' duties: to serve humanity well and to uphold and elevate the ideals of Nursing. She promoted thoughtful reflection and constructive discussions at ABEn events, aiming to support the development of the profession. She advocated the idea that Nursing was a liberal profession that needed to learn how to engage in dialogue with the country's political leadership. She voiced criticism regarding social pressures, lack of political engagement, and democratic deficits, factors she believed hindered the profession's progress. She was deeply committed to improving the quality of education and professional training. In 1965, she published the book *Manual do Auxiliar de Enfermagem* (Nursing Assistant Manual), with copyright protections in place and a small percentage of royalties allocated to the authors, all from EEUUSP, while the remaining proceeds were directed to the Marina de Andrade Rezende Fund, which financed ABEn's publication expenses⁽³²⁾.

In 1966, Circe de Melo Ribeiro convened 26 directors of nursing schools from all five regions of Brazil at the *Escola de Enfermagem Anna Nery* (EEAN, Anna Nery School of Nursing) to discuss the expansion of the undergraduate nursing curriculum. The meeting resulted in a Letter of Suggestions, which was submitted to the Federal Council of Education⁽³²⁾. She also directed the Nursing Department of the São Paulo branch of the Winthrop Laboratory, where she actively promoted and elevated the nursing profession.

The highlight of her second term (1966–1968) was the beginning of the construction of ABEn *Nacional's* institutional headquarters in Brasília, Federal District. She personally laid the first trowel of cement during the symbolic cornerstone ceremony on July 21, 1967, held on the final day of the 19th CBen Delegate Assembly. According to the July 1969 edition of the *Boletim Informativo*, the official donation of the land took place on March 5, 1967, at the headquarters of the Federal District's City Hall. The deed was formalized at the 1st Notary Office by a representative of the president of the Urban Development Company of Brazil's New Capital (Novacap) and by the president of ABEn *Nacional*⁽³²⁾.

Circe de Melo Ribeiro established financial contribution quotas for ABEn's State Sections and organized a comprehensive fundraising plan for the construction of the headquarters. In 1967, she signed the construction agreement with the company responsible for the project, contributing personally with monetary donations and a pearl ring—an act that inspired other nurses across the country to do the same⁽¹⁷⁾. In recognition of her significant financial and service contributions toward the headquarters' construction, she was awarded the *Diploma of Honor of Merit* by ABEn *Nacional* in 1971. Another notable achievement of her administration was the creation of the Special Commission for the Study of ABEn's History, coordinated by Edith de Magalhães Fraenkel. The commission aimed to recover the association's historical legacy and publish a documentary chronicling ABEn's journey, as part of the celebration of the organization's 40th anniversary⁽³²⁾.

In 1967, in partnership with Johnson & Johnson, she established the "Nurse of the Year" award to honor nurses who demonstrated excellence in professional practice. The first recipient was Waleska Paixão in 1968. Circe de Melo Ribeiro served on the award's judging committee in 1968 and 1970.

Figure 3 features Circe de Melo Ribeiro alongside Clarice Ferrarini and representatives from the *Ministério da Educação e Cultura* (Ministry of Education and Culture), the *Ministério da Saúde* (Ministry of Health), and the Pan American Health Organization. The photograph was taken during the Seminar on Public Health Nursing Education in Brazilian Nursing Schools, held in Rio de Janeiro in February 1967.



Figure 3 – Circe de Melo Ribeiro, president of ABEn *Nacional*, 1967

Source: ABEn *Nacional*.

During her third term as president (1980–1984), Circe de Melo Ribeiro joined the Working Group for the structuring of nursing and the systematization of its activities within INAMPS, alongside members of the *Conselho Federal de Enfermagem* (Cofen, Federal Nursing Council) and authorities in education and health. She contributed to the drafting of the report submitted to the INAMPS Presidency for dissemination purposes.

She showed remarkable dedication to keeping the Center for Nursing Studies and Research (CEPen/ABEn) active, a center established in 1979 under the leadership of Ieda de Alencar Barreira, advocating for the regular publication of the *Research and Researchers* catalog, which compiled theses and dissertations defended in Brazil⁽³²⁾.

She participated in the 2nd National Seminar on Nursing Research (SENPE), held in Brasília in 1981, where leaders from ABEn Nacional, Cofen, and the *Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico* (CNPQ, National Council for Scientific and Technological Development) discussed the challenges of academic and scientific research in Brazilian nursing. In partnership with Cofen, she conducted the study *The Nursing Workforce*, which outlined the profile of Brazilian nursing in the 1980s and was published in 1986^(32,33).

In 1980, she signed a document rejecting Bill No. 2.726/80, which proposed subordinating nursing to the medical profession. She also participated in the revision of the draft bill for the Professional Practice Law of Brazilian Nursing, prepared by Cofen, to replace the outdated 1955 regulation. The resulting legislation, Law No. 7.498, enacted on June 25, 1986, and signed by President José Sarney, remains in effect to this day⁽³⁴⁾.

As president of ABEn Nacional, Circe de Melo Ribeiro served as the Executive Director of REBEn, was a member of the Permanent Commission on Hospital Nursing, and translated American nursing literature into Brazilian Portuguese, contributing to the publication of international content in the journal. Her experience with REBEn proved valuable when, in 1973, she joined the Nursing Commission of the *Revista Paulista de Hospitais*, published by the São Paulo Hospital Association, of which she was a member^(25,35).

Circe de Melo Ribeiro actively participated in various roles and commissions within ABEn Nacional. She served as 2nd Treasurer (1961) and 1st Vice President (1968–1970 and 1970–1972). In 1969, she contributed to the drafting and presentation of ABEn's work policy document, titled *Declaration of Principles*, which was used to guide the activities of the association's State Sections. She was an advisor to the Nursing Assistant Training Program for Brazil's Central-West, Northeast, and North regions, a joint initiative of the Ministry of Health, PAHO/WHO, and UNICEF. She chaired ABEn's Permanent Statute Commission (1972–1976), where she implemented reforms such as the inclusion of undergraduate nursing students as a membership category⁽³²⁾.

She also served as Secretary of the International Council of Nurses (ICN) Sector, created ABEn's Permanent Legislation Commission, and presided over the Nursing Care Commission, during which she implemented in-service education plans for nurses and nursing assistants at HCFMUSP. In response to the creation of technical-level nursing education by the *Conselho Estadual de Educação do Rio de Janeiro* (State Education Council of Rio de Janeiro), she opposed the initiative, believing that Brazilian nursing did not require additional categories beyond those recognized by Law No. 2.604/55 - Nursing Assistant and Nurse. In her view, the country should invest more in undergraduate education and nurses' qualification. Despite her opposition, the category of Nursing Technician was officially established in Brazil in 1966⁽³²⁾.

She encouraged the organization of the 1st Regional Seminar on Secondary-Level Nursing Education for instructors of Nursing Fundamentals, hosted by the *Escola Técnica de Enfermagem Catarina Lebouré* (Catarina Lebouré Technical Nursing School), in Paraná. At the request of the *Departamento Administrativo do Serviço Público* (DASP, Public Service Administrative Department), she participated in the classification of higher-level nursing positions. She founded the Brazilian Academy of Hospital Administration in Rio de Janeiro. In 1970, in Caracas, Venezuela, she took part in the formal act of ABEn Nacional's affiliation with the Pan American Federation of Nursing⁽³²⁾.

President of the ABEn-SP (1972–1975)

Directors and faculty members of EEUSP have maintained a close relationship with ABEn São Paulo (ABEn/SP), founded in 1947 by Edith de Magalhães Fraenkel, who served as its first president. Their active involvement in both ABEn/SP and ABEn Nacional has made significant contributions and continues to inspire new generations to dedicate time to politically strengthen this professional association and to promote the scientific capacity and leadership of nursing in São Paulo and throughout Brazil. Circe de Melo Ribeiro served as president of ABEn/SP from 1972 to 1975 (Figure 4)⁽³⁶⁾.



Figure 4 – Circe de Melo Ribeiro, president of ABEn/SP, decade 1970

Source: ABEn/SP.

In addition to her duties as president of ABEn *São Paulo* (ABEn/SP), Circe de Melo Ribeiro was a member of the entity's Nursing Care Commission. Her administration was marked by several notable initiatives: the donation of her aquamarine and diamond ring, which was auctioned and the proceeds fully allocated to support the construction of the association's headquarters in São Paulo, the formation of a commission tasked with creating a state-level professional association, which led to the founding of the São Paulo State Nurses' Union, the compilation of a list of São Paulo nurses nominated to form the provisional board of the Cofen upon its establishment in 1973, and the creation of the *Revista Paulista de Enfermagem* (REPEEn)⁽³⁶⁾.

During her presidency, the passing of Glete de Alcântara occurred. Circe de Melo Ribeiro paid tribute to this distinguished figure in São Paulo nursing, who had been her professor at EEUSP and later her colleague at EERP-USP. She published an article in REBEn expressing her deep sense of loss and the honor of having known and worked alongside such an ethical, competent, and fully dedicated professional committed to advancing Brazilian nursing⁽³⁷⁾.

Personality traits

Circe de Melo Ribeiro never married nor had children, but she symbolically adopted and cared for her five siblings and 27 nieces and nephews. She inherited the Kardecist spiritual tradition from her father and maternal grandfather. She followed the path of education, inspired by her paternal grandfather. Her career as a primary school teacher was influenced by her older siblings, a profession also embraced by her sisters and some sisters-in-law. In her professional life, she drew upon the courage, energy, and philanthropic spirit passed down from her mother and grandmothers⁽²³⁾.

She was an exemplary professional as a teacher, nurse, and administrator. She stood out as a faculty member and leader of professional associations, recognized for her knowledge, ethical conduct, work ethic, confidence, and assurance in her practice. At both EERP-USP and EEUSP, she was actively engaged in institutional development, collaborated with healthcare institutions, and promoted the nursing profession and its scientific foundation. Throughout her career, she cultivated strong and lasting friendships that deeply marked her life. She was a contemporary of the pioneering and prominent leaders of Brazilian nursing, especially those named throughout this study.

In testimonies given for other published EEUSP studies, Anayde Corrêa de Carvalho stated that Circe de Melo Ribeiro had a strong temperament, was critical of others' work, and often displayed a sense of superiority due to her extensive knowledge. Maria Madalena Januário Leite described her as ahead of her time, intelligent, and possessing a broad vision of the future, attributes shaped by her engagement with foreign literature, especially from American nursing theorists, which she avidly consumed and shared with her students. Regina Vitoria Lotti Serrano Abbud affirmed that she was an incredible teacher. Regina Cavalcante de Albuquerque Lemmi regarded her as one of the great names in Brazilian nursing, playing a pivotal role in introducing Nursing Administration knowledge to the country by bringing, translating, and adapting international references to the Brazilian context⁽²⁶⁾. Isabel Cristina Kowal Olm Cunha noted that she was controversial yet extremely competent in her actions⁽³⁸⁾. Taka Oguisso recalled working alongside her at EEUSP, ABEn/SP, and ABEn Nacional, and expressed having absorbed from her a deep appreciation for the profession, a commitment to professional education, and a dedication to improving the quality of nursing services⁽³⁹⁾.

Paulina Kurcgant, who had the closest relationship with Circe, expressed her gratitude by describing her as visionary, principled, dignified, and generous, a standout figure who delved deeply into everything she undertook. She was humorous, honest, sincere, focused, and demanding commitment, dedication, effort, and productivity from her graduate students. She assigned difficult tasks to her mentees because she recognized their capabilities and trusted their potential. She disliked dishonesty and did not accept excuses for unfinished work. She insisted on thorough preparation from nurses so they could contribute meaningfully to the advancement of the profession. Circe was a great mentor, demanding, yet a benevolent friend. She was meticulous and fully aware of her own capabilities. Personally, she was reserved and did not allow for intimacy. Though she had a reputation for being authoritarian, she was not; she accepted contradiction, provided it was well-founded. She was tough, challenging, and feared - traits attributed to her strong personality⁽²⁶⁾.

According to Paulina Kurcgant, Circe de Melo Ribeiro was a prominent leader in the field of Nursing Administration across Brazil, from north to south, during the 1970s and 1980s. She was a visionary thinker, firmly committed to the future she envisioned for Brazilian nursing. A skilled and empowered nurse, she took upon herself the responsibility of promoting the profession's potential in care management throughout the country. She believed that empowerment in nursing stemmed from knowledge, critical reflection on professional practice, and proactive action. She argued that holding a Master's or Doctoral degree was not enough, despite the power and privileges these titles conferred. She was dissatisfied with the submissive role Brazilian nurses often played in relation to the medical profession⁽²⁶⁾.

The aforementioned testimonies offer a faithful portrait of the character traits of this remarkable figure in the history of Brazilian nursing, framed within the historical context of the early days of graduate studies in Nursing Administration at ENO-EEUSP. As a graduate of a U.S. institution, Circe de Melo Ribeiro absorbed the professional identity of American nursing, marked by discipline, control, and the preservation of the profession's image. In her teaching practice, she demanded from her Brazilian students a professional demeanor similar to what she had observed in the United States. This approach was not always well received by her teaching colleagues, which explains some of the criticisms previously mentioned. Nevertheless, she was open to dialogue, approachable, and enjoyed sharing her knowledge with students, often lending them personal bibliographic materials she brought back from her travels abroad.

She was fluent in Portuguese, English, and Spanish. Her command of the English language proved especially valuable in her professional life, enabling her to read articles and books, write documents, and translate key materials, including (i) the *Nursing Clinical History Manual*, developed at the College of Nurses at the University of Florida, which was later used by Brazilian nurses in both research and practice, (ii) the article *Nursing Assessment* by theorist Faye Glenn Abdellah, and (iii) the *Method of Organization and Functioning of Teamwork Applied to Nursing*, developed by Miss Eleanor Lambertsen^(25,35).

In her many speeches as president of ABEn Nacional, she revealed the values that shaped her character, a woman of faith and spirituality, who practiced the Christian Spiritist Doctrine. She was a staunch advocate for public health, the quality of professional education, and excellence in nursing care. She upheld the principles of freedom, justice, human rights, and democracy. She deeply valued knowledge and the history of the profession and honored the vocation she embraced - Nursing.

Photographs (Figures 1 to 4) portray the visual identity of this discreet Brazilian woman, with a striking gaze and a preference for simple, classic attire: floral blouses, blazers, tailored suits, dresses, necklaces, scarves, earrings, and neatly styled short hair.

Around the year 2000, Circe de Melo Ribeiro suffered an Ischemic Stroke, which severely affected movement on the right side of her body. Twelve years later, she was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent treatment at the Cancer Institute of the State of São Paulo (ICESP), part of HCFMUSP, possibly cared for by a former student. She passed away at the age of 93, in São Paulo, on August 6, 2020.

The *Conselho Regional de Enfermagem* (Coren/SP, Regional Nursing Council) and ABEn *Nacional* issued statements mourning the loss of this distinguished figure, who made significant contributions to the advancement of Brazilian nursing. EEUSP also published a tribute on its institutional website, expressing condolences to her family and friends during this time of profound sorrow.

Limitations of the study

The study was limited by the scarcity of photographs and records concerning the life story and professional contributions of Circe de Melo Ribeiro. This lack of documentation led researchers to delve into institutional archives and various published sources in order to extract scientific works and relevant personal information, which were then synthesized into the biography presented.

Contributions to the history of nursing, health and education

The findings made it possible to understand the efforts of this USP educator, a pioneer in Nursing Administration in Brazil, to elevate the status of nursing management in the country to a level comparable to that of American nursing. They also contributed to the recovery of part of the institutional memory of EEUSP, ABEn *Nacional*, and ABEn/SP between the 1960s and 1980s.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study achieved its intended goal by presenting the biographical traits and professional journey of Circe de Melo Ribeiro, a native of Itapeva and a distinguished nurse affiliated with USP. It highlights her contributions in care delivery, teaching, research, and leadership within both São Paulo and Brazilian nursing, while also revealing unique aspects of her personality. Her love for humanity led her to dedicate her life to Nursing, foregoing the traditional family model of marriage and children that prevailed among Brazilian women of her time.

In her professional political life, her leadership at ABEn *Nacional* and ABEn/SP stands out, work carried out with enthusiasm, goodwill, and altruism, as board members of the organization are not remunerated and do not hold formal employment ties. She was fully aware of the sacrifices the role demanded: hard work, travel, distance from family and friends, and the comforts of home. Yet, these challenges were overcome by her conviction in the importance of her contribution to the development of the profession in Brazil. She valued nursing history and was deeply concerned with preserving the memory of the profession.

Circe de Melo Ribeiro was a nurse committed to the scientific advancement of Brazilian nursing. She fought tirelessly to promote leadership, visibility, and empowerment among Brazilian nurses, following the example of their American counterparts. She left a rich legacy through her published articles, pioneering the dissemination of concepts, principles, and elements of Nursing Administration.

Her life's journey can be interpreted as deeply meaningful, lived through actions connected to primary education and professional nursing training as a primary school teacher and nursing educator, respectively. She honored education, a cherished value in her family, passed down through generations.

Through her pioneering spirit, competence, and tireless work ethic, Circe de Melo Ribeiro etched her name into the history of Brazilian nursing. Her life story deserved to be written, so that future generations may recognize her significance and draw inspiration from her work, legacy, and virtues.

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