

## EDITORIAL

## A health and social sciences research center in a low-density region in Portugal: opportunities and impact for nursing

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The creation of research structures in regions far from major academic hubs is often discussed in terms of equity, development, and scientific opportunity. Yet for nursing, the question goes deeper. It concerns how knowledge is produced, how it circulates, and how it ultimately shapes the care provided to citizens. The experience of establishing a health and social sciences research center in a sparsely populated region of Portugal illustrates this broader reflection, particularly in a context marked by demographic aging, limited access to specialized services, and persistent territorial inequalities (European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, 2025). In such territories, the presence of a research unit is not merely an academic achievement—it is a statement about the value of science in places where it is most needed.

Low density regions such as Alto Alentejo are often perceived as peripheral, but this perception obscures their potential. These territories offer fertile ground for applied research in health, aging, community care, and social well being. Their demographic profile—older populations, chronic disease prevalence, and social vulnerability—creates a living laboratory for studying the intersections between health, territory, and social determinants. When a research unit is rooted in such a context, it becomes more than an institutional structure; it becomes a mechanism for territorial cohesion, a driver of local innovation, and a catalyst for professional development. For nursing, this is particularly significant. The presence of a dedicated research center offers a space where disciplinary identity can grow and where nurses can engage in research pathways that are often difficult to pursue outside major cities (Research Center on Health and Social Sciences [CARE], 2025).

The Portuguese evaluation framework for research units reinforces this orientation by emphasizing scientific merit, relevance, and real societal impact rather than purely quantitative indicators. This approach aligns naturally with nursing,

a discipline grounded in practice, human experience, and the translation of evidence into care. It recognizes that impactful research is not always produced in large metropolitan centers; it can emerge from smaller regions where proximity to communities allows for meaningful engagement and co creation of knowledge. In this sense, research centers embedded in local realities offer a unique advantage: they are close enough to understand the needs of the population and structured enough to generate rigorous scientific evidence.

For nurses, this environment is transformative. Research centers provide opportunities for scientific initiation, postgraduate training, doctoral work, and participation in interdisciplinary teams. These pathways strengthen the profession's capacity to generate evidence and to lead innovation in clinical practice. They also help address a long standing challenge in nursing: the gap between research and practice. Studies in Portugal have shown that when nurses are supported through mentoring, structured research environments, and protected time, barriers to evidence based practice decrease significantly (Pereira Pinto et al., 2023). This is particularly relevant in rural and low density regions, where clinical teams often face resource constraints and where the implementation of evidence based interventions can have an immediate and visible impact.

Examples of such interventions are increasingly common. Health literacy programs for older adults, community based telehealth initiatives, patient safety audits, and rehabilitation interventions demonstrate how research can be integrated into daily practice. These projects illustrate the potential of nursing led research to improve outcomes in areas such as chronic disease management, functional capacity, and quality of life. In regions like Alentejo, where older adults often face isolation and limited access to services, research informed interventions in health literacy and community care have demonstrated measurable benefits (Sadio et al., 2025). These initiatives show that research is not an abstract

exercise but a practical tool for improving care and strengthening community resilience.

The link between education and regulation also gains strength in this environment. Master's programs, specialty training, and clinical internships benefit from proximity to active research, allowing students and professionals to engage with real projects and contribute to the development of new knowledge. This integration reinforces the idea that research is not an isolated academic activity but a component of professional identity. It also supports the development of advanced competencies in areas such as clinical decision making, leadership, and quality improvement. For students and early career nurses, participating in research projects within their own region fosters a sense of belonging and reinforces the idea that high quality science can be produced anywhere.

Ultimately, the establishment of a research center like CARE (Research Center on Health and Social Sciences) demonstrates that investing in science in peripheral regions is not merely a matter of regional development – it is a commitment to improving the quality of care, strengthening professional autonomy, and ensuring that nursing contributes fully to national and European research agendas. As health systems face demographic pressures, digital transformation, and growing complexity, the ability of nurses to lead and participate in research will be increasingly essential. The challenges of the coming decades – population aging, chronic disease, health inequalities, and the integration of digital technologies – require solutions that are both scientifically grounded and sensitive to local realities. Research centers embedded in low density regions are uniquely positioned to contribute to this agenda.

Looking beyond Portugal, the comparison with the Czech Republic highlights both shared challenges and different institutional landscapes. Czech nurses often navigate funding schemes that prioritize applied biomedical research, which can make disciplinary visibility more difficult. National agencies such as Czech Health Research Agency (AZV CR) focus strongly on clinical and translational research, and while this creates opportunities, it also places nursing in a competitive environment dominated by medical disciplines (AZV CR, 2025). Yet examples of successful nursing led projects show that progress is possible when institutional support, international collaboration, and clear research agendas converge.

The Portuguese experience suggests that territorially anchored research centers can help overcome

structural disadvantages and create more inclusive research ecosystems – an insight that resonates with ongoing discussions in Central Europe.

In both countries, the future of nursing research depends on environments that nurture curiosity, methodological rigor, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Research centers embedded in local realities, yet connected to international networks, offer precisely this combination. They remind us that scientific advancement and high quality care are inseparable – and that even in the most remote regions, knowledge can flourish and transform practice. For nursing, this is not only an opportunity but a responsibility: to ensure that research serves communities, strengthens professional identity, and contributes to a more equitable and evidence informed health system.

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