



# Stomatherapists in the world of work: Practicalities and difficulties for the professional practice

*Estomaterapeutas no mundo do trabalho: facilidades e dificuldades para o exercício profissional*

*Estomaterapeutas en el mundo del trabajo: facilidades y dificultades para el ejercicio*

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** to analyze the practicalities and difficulties perceived by graduates of a post-graduate program in Stomatherapy to perform in the world of work. **Methods:** a qualitative research study, developed with 22 graduates from a Postgraduate course in Nursing in Stomatherapy, from a public university in the Southeast of Brazil. Data collection took place through semi-structured interviews, between January and April 2018. The interviews were treated based on the Thematic Content Analysis. **Results:** the following were learned as practicalities: recognition of the specialist, professional autonomy, knowledge acquired through specialization, availability of care technologies. As hindering factors, the following were cited: lack of human and material resources, low remuneration of the specialist, unfavorable institutional policy, lack of appreciation for the stomatherapist. **Conclusion and implication for the practice:** the difficulties analyzed in the study were predominantly linked to the configuration of the world of work, whose foundations are based on the neoliberal ideas of the minimum state and the wiping out of the public machinery.

**Keywords:** Job Market; Nursing; Specialties nursing; Professional role; Work.

## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** analisar as facilidades e dificuldades percebidas por egressos de uma pós-graduação em Estomaterapia para atuação no mundo do trabalho. **Métodos:** pesquisa qualitativa, desenvolvida com 22 egressos de um Curso de Pós-graduação em Enfermagem em Estomaterapia, de uma universidade pública da Região Sudeste do Brasil. A coleta de dados ocorreu por meio de entrevista semiestruturada, entre janeiro e abril de 2018. As entrevistas foram tratadas com base na análise temática de conteúdo. **Resultados:** apreenderam-se como facilidades: reconhecimento do especialista, autonomia profissional, conhecimentos adquiridos por meio da especialização, disponibilidade de tecnologias de cuidados. Como fatores dificultadores, citaram-se: carência de recursos humanos e materiais, baixa remuneração do especialista, política institucional desfavorável, não valorização do estomaterapeuta. **Conclusões e implicações para a prática:** as facilidades identificadas se relacionaram com o reconhecimento do especialista; a autonomia; a ascensão e o crescimento profissional; os conhecimentos adquiridos por meio da especialização; e a disponibilidade de tecnologias do cuidado para realização da prática profissional. As dificuldades analisadas no estudo estiveram vinculadas predominantemente à configuração do mundo do trabalho, cujos fundamentos se pautam no ideário neoliberal do Estado mínimo e no enxugamento da máquina pública.

**Palavras-chave:** Mercado de trabalho; Enfermagem; Especialidades de enfermagem; Papel profissional; Trabalho.

## RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** analizar las facilidades y dificultades percibidas por los egresados de un Postgrado en Estomaterapia para trabajar en el mundo laboral. **Métodos:** investigación cualitativa, desarrollada con 22 graduados de un curso de Postgrado en Enfermería en Estomaterapia, de una universidad pública en la Región Sudeste de Brasil. La recopilación de datos se realizó a través de entrevistas semiestructuradas, entre enero y abril de 2018. Las entrevistas se trataron en función del análisis de contenido temático. **Resultados:** se identificaron las siguientes facilidades: reconocimiento del especialista, autonomía profesional, conocimiento adquirido a través de la especialización, disponibilidad de tecnologías de atención. Como factores que obstaculizan, se citaron los siguientes: falta de recursos humanos y materiales, baja remuneración del especialista, política institucional desfavorable, falta de valoración del estomaterapeuta. **Conclusión e implicancia para la práctica:** las dificultades analizadas en el estudio estuvieron principalmente relacionadas con la configuración del mundo del trabajo, cuyos fundamentos se basan en las ideas neoliberales del estado mínimo y en la eliminación de la maquinaria pública.

**Palabras clave:** Mercado de trabajo; Enfermería; Especialidades de enfermería; Rol profesional; Trabajo.

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## INTRODUCTION

The object of this study addresses the practicalities and difficulties perceived by graduates of a Stomatherapy Course, in the Brazilian Southeast Region, to act as specialists in the world of work. The theme emerged from empirical observations, captured in informal conversations with specialists in the field, who expressed dialectical feelings about working in the labor market, sometimes emphasizing pleasure, sometimes referring to suffering. The manifestation of such feelings seemed to involve different situations, such as the configuration of the work organization, the political and economic conformation of work, the recognition and appreciation of Nursing and Stomatherapy.

The *Lato sensu* Graduate Program in Nursing is considered one of the current possibilities to qualify nurses for the professional practice, contributing to the transformation and excellence of Nursing. In this context, there is the specialty Nursing in Stomatherapy, which emerged in the late 1950s in the United States of America, and has since spread worldwide.<sup>1,2</sup>

The post-graduate nurse in Stomatherapy is called stomatherapist, being one who has knowledge and skills to care for people with stomas, wounds, fistulas, catheters, drains and anal and urinary incontinence. This specialist works in the fields of teaching, assistance, research, administration, sales, advisory and consultancy.<sup>2</sup> The specialty is growing in Brazil, and many nurses have sought qualification in this area, with the objective of acquire expertise and expand the possibilities of action.

It is emphasized that the current labor market is characterized by high demands, as a result of significant global transformations resulting from scientific, economic and technological development, motivating the professionals to quickly adapt to the new trends imposed by the world of work. Thus, certain characteristics and requirements are necessary for the professionals, such as initiative, autonomy, problem solving capacity, and creativity, among others, to achieve insertion and maintenance in this market.<sup>3-5</sup>

It is also emphasized that the predominant economic model in Brazil is based on the neoliberal ideology, which, among other repercussions for the world of work, results in high demands for the most qualified workers, emphasizing skills such as creativity, flexibility and capacity to innovate, specific knowledge and resilience to deal with pressure and with the fast pace of change.<sup>3-5</sup>

Furthermore, as a result of neoliberal precepts, the public machinery has been wiped out, resulting in precarious working conditions. In addition, there is a decrease in public tenders and jobs for Nursing workers, causing fear of losing their jobs, competitiveness among peers and low solidarity in the work context.<sup>4,5</sup>

It is essential that the future specialists, even during the qualification process, glimpse, through theoretical-practical activities, the practicalities and/or difficulties that they may encounter in the work reality. This is important for the professional to have, in the work dynamics, greater empowerment and correct decision-making, enabling differentiated and effective care.

It is also necessary to reflect on the need for convergence between the interests of the teaching-learning process and the

material infrastructure of the health services, in order not only to train stomatherapists who can act with quality in the face of the limitations imposed on health work, but also to strengthen the critical and political capacity of these professionals in order to claim better working conditions. In this way, it contributes to the feeling of pleasure and recognition for the work developed.

In view of the punctuated issues, the objective was to analyze the practicalities and difficulties perceived by graduates of a Postgraduate Course in Stomatherapy to perform in the world of work.

## METHODS

A qualitative, descriptive-exploratory study, carried out with graduates of a Postgraduate Course in Nursing in Stomatherapy, from a public university in the Brazilian Southeast Region. This course meets the standards recommended by the Brazilian Association of Stomatherapy and by the World Council of Enterostomal Therapists, has a duration of 14 months, and was conducted on-site, encompassing theoretical, theoretical-practical and practical activities. The selection process for that course takes place through public selection, curriculum analysis and exam with objective questions, with the candidate with a mean equal to or greater than 7.0 being approved.

The following was listed as a criterion for the inclusion of the participants: being a specialist in stomatherapy in the aforementioned university with at least three years of qualification. This temporal criterion was based on the fact that this time was considered sufficient for the graduates to have appropriated what is related to the exercise of the specialty. Furthermore, the time frame for inclusion is justified because new graduates are understood as those who have graduated up to three years ago, and who are still in the process of consolidation in the labor market.<sup>6</sup>

The exclusion criterion established was being a graduate of the class of 2007, the year of the first class of the course since, at the time, there were no consistent records, at the *lato sensu* secretariat, regarding the data for contact with possible participants of this class.

Based on the listed criteria, the six-year time frame was considered, determining graduates from 2008 to 2013 as the target population. Data collection was conducted from January to April 2018 by means of semi-structured interviews. Twenty-two graduates of the aforementioned course participated in the study, selected using the "snowball" technique. Thus, initially, three graduates from classes who met the established time criterion were chosen. These were asked to indicate other graduates who were included in the study selection criteria. The interviews were interrupted when the participants started to repeat the contents previously obtained, reaching the saturation point.

The interviews were conducted and recorded in a reserved place and at a scheduled time, according to the availability of the participants, with a mean duration of 20 minutes. There was a complete transcription of the content of the interviews, in the Microsoft Word text editor. Thus, the participants were asked to comment on the practicalities and difficulties to work

as a stomatherapist in the current world of work in health. This gave rise to a dialog aimed at obtaining the research object. It is noteworthy that the question was prepared by the team of researchers in this study.

The interviews were treated based on the technique of thematic content analysis,<sup>7</sup> reaching a total of 746 Registration Units (RUs). It should be noted that there was no use of software for data processing. This procedure was performed manually by the lead researcher, using knowledge of mathematics and statistics, thus making it possible to account for the RUs and units of meaning.

In order to maintain the confidentiality related to the identification of the participants of the study, the letter E was adopted for Stomatherapist ("*Estomaterapeuta*" in Portuguese), followed by a cardinal number which represented the chronological order of the interviews. In accordance with the required ethical standards, the study was evaluated by the Research Ethics Committee, being approved according to opinion No. 2,314,626/2017 and Certificate of Presentation for Ethical Appreciation No. 0107217.8.0000.5282.

## RESULTS

From data processing, through thematic content analysis, the category called "Performance in the world of work: Practicalities and difficulties perceived by the graduates" emerged. This category included two subcategories, which were entitled: i) Practicalities experienced by graduates in the world of work; and ii) Factors that hinder the specialist's performance in the world of work.

### Performance in the world of work: Practicalities and difficulties perceived by graduates

#### Practicalities experienced by graduates in the world of work

This subcategory presented 370 RUs. The participants recognized that having the title of specialist in Stomatherapy significantly contributed to insertion and subsequent maintenance in the world of work, with new market possibilities.

*Because I have the specialization, I was a representative for five years in a multinational and a dressing distributor. And I wanted to work on a dressing committee, I never had that ambition, but do you know when things are going on in your life? The invitations came naturally. It was a very quick insertion in the area. (E7)*

The fact that they completed the course at a public university provided the graduates with greater social and professional recognition. Training at that institution was considered a driving factor for insertion in the labor market.

*Yes, the name of the institution influences, the name is important, it gives you a good entry in places, greater recognition, especially at this time when we are living with precarious jobs and wages. (E12)*

*The specialization course curriculum is one of the most complete in Brazil. You have the doors open very easily, it's a differentiator. In addition, it is recognized by the Brazilian Stomatherapy Association (Sobest) and by the World Council of Enterostomal Therapists (WCET), which also makes a difference. When the place of training is mentioned, doors open to work in different institutions, not only in assistance, but also in teaching. (E20)*

Other aspects highlighted were the recognition and appreciation of the work performed by the stomatherapist, among peers and by society.

*One practicality is that, when people see the result of your work as a specialist, that what you have proposed has worked, you become respected, valued in your work environment by other professionals. (E01)*

*The practicality that I had was in relation to my current job, to be recognized as a stomatherapist and to have been called to work because of that, because of this speciality. It is wonderful to see the recognition of my work as a stomatherapist within a specific area by my peers. (E17)*

The graduates also reported the possibility of acting autonomously.

*The practicality is that you have the autonomy to exercise this function. I do not need the framework of an institution, public or private, in order to exercise this speciality. I can simply exercise it, visiting the patient's home, for example. (E06)*

It was verified that a facilitating factor, made possible by the specialization, was the opportunity of professional growth in the institution where these specialists worked, as a result of the conclusion of graduate studies.

*Today, I assume a position that, without a doubt, if I did not have the specialization, I would not assume. So, the specialization helped in my professional ascension. The stomatherapist, in my work, not only can be a team leader, but also in my case, I was invited to be chairman of the dressing committee of a large hospital, which has plastic surgeons, clinical doctors, physiotherapists on the team. In this way, the president is the one who traces the conduct, of course, after listening to the group. (E20)*

They also commented on the ease with which the institutions currently make available a range of products/materials for use in patients, thus enabling better quality care.

*Nowadays, most of the hospitals have a good variety of material. So, I think this is a practicality. We have, for*

*example, “hydrogel”, “adapctic”, unlike in the past that only had “collagenase” and, at most, “AGE”. In my perception, this facilitates our performance, making it more resolute, of better quality. (E16)*

### **Factors that hinder the specialist’s performance in the world of work**

This subcategory presented 376 RUs. Although the graduates have declared as a facilitating factor to perform in the world of work the fact that the institutions present an important range of materials for the professional practice, some interviewed stomatherapists highlighted the lack of these materials in health institutions, especially in public ones, as an element which weakens the work process of that specialist.

*The difficulties are sometimes much greater. Why? We have the knowledge, only that we are often unable to properly use it because there is lack of material. In the practice, we don’t have what we learn during graduate school. We don’t have the inputs, mainly in the public service. (E08)*

The graduates cited as another difficulty the limited amount of human resources to enable effective and safe care.

*We experience a reality of lack of personnel. In addition to having few nurses, specialists are lacking in the institutions. (E01)*

*We work with a team in which the number of nurses is very low for care, including the number of technicians and assistants that we have in the market, so it overloads. (E06)*

Another situation highlighted by the graduates was the population’s lack of knowledge about stomatherapy, a factor that makes it difficult for specialists to work in this area.

*We are still poorly known as a specialty. People know little about what a stomatherapist is and what he develops, so our performance is compromised. (E14)*

In addition, it was verified that Stomatherapy has a restricted field, configuring itself as a difficulty for performance.

*So, the truth is that you don’t have much field of work. There are few places that have the specialization available. We know that the field of work today is still small, it is reduced. So, I think it’s very complicated. The field in Rio de Janeiro is very reduced. (E16)*

## **DISCUSSION**

The world of work has been guided by neoliberal ideas, which are not only characterized by an economic philosophy,

but also by a way of living that influences cultural and emotional values, changing life in society and working relationships.<sup>4</sup> In this perspective, the transformation of the world of work, brought about by neoliberalism, has redefined the configuration of organizations and labor processes, which restricts some jobs, but offers new fronts of action, especially for the most qualified and for those who have knowledge of denser technologies.<sup>3-5,8</sup>

It is emphasized that the world of contemporary work has been marked by globalization and technological modernization, appreciation of qualified knowledge and the ability of workers to solve problems. Therefore, the market demand has driven professionals to train themselves in specialization courses, master’s and doctoral degrees as a strategy to respond to the increasingly complex and innovative labor demands and pressures.<sup>9</sup>

In this sense, the world of work has contributed to the insertion of stomatherapists in the market, including not only in assistance, but also in positions, such as those of management, teaching and in the representation of products related to the area, which shows how much the knowledge acquired during the post-graduation has generated new work possibilities. In this way, knowledge becomes important and is considered an indispensable resource in the globalized and neoliberal world.<sup>2,4,9</sup>

In this context, it is understood that the university is an important institution, as it has instruments, structures and human resources to foster and strengthen the quality of the workforce. In the universities, it is possible to express opinions, attitudes and projects that contribute to produce knowledge and train/qualify professionals.<sup>9,10</sup>

Public universities have high standards of teaching and research, maintain a high degree of independence, with regard to the immediate determinations of the market, despite the external pressures they suffer to train human resources and develop research studies, according to the interest of capital, and not, imperiously, based on social needs. Thus, it is noted that, in these spaces, there is production of science and dissemination of new essential knowledge for society.<sup>9,10</sup>

This reinforces the reason why the participants reported that being a specialist graduating from a public university is a driving factor for the insertion and maintenance of the stomatherapist in the world of work. Despite the difficulties that permeate public education in Brazil, there is still, in these places, great incentive to the production of science and the qualification of teachers, in addition to the constant concern with quality teaching, at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

Recognition among peers was also indicated in the interviews, being seen as a key element in the individual’s relationship with work and work organization, which directly impacts on the motivational processes and perceptions of appreciation of the worker.

It is asserted that recognition is a process of symbolic retribution, aimed at judgments about people’s actions. The psychodynamics of work has correlated lack of recognition to the processes of suffering, illness and depersonalization of the worker.<sup>11</sup>

The graduates signaled that recognition was associated with the knowledge that these specialists demonstrated. The search for knowledge, notoriously, promotes new possibilities for the professionals, enriches the curriculum and makes workers become a reference in their areas of performance, as they have different expertise, granting them opportunities for personal and professional growth.<sup>2,12</sup>

This is a relevant fact, since people want to be recognized and valued in the institutions in which they operate, constituting a motivating and driving factor for the success of the work process. When this recognition is linked to knowledge, it generates in the worker a feeling of satisfaction, causing the worker to increasingly seek qualification.<sup>2,12</sup>

Another important issue to be discussed is that recognition meets professional autonomy, which is also apprehended in the speeches of the graduates. Autonomy is understood as the ability of a person and/or group to set their own rules and laws, contributing to independence; it is conceived, then, as the capacity for self-determination of an individual or a group. Thus, autonomy is closely related to the ability to develop the work process without necessarily depending on other professionals, or depending as little as possible.<sup>13,14</sup>

The autonomous activity obtained greater amplitude in the professional practice after the emergence of the first Nursing offices and clinics, services created with the purpose of attending to the care that can be performed in an extra-hospital environment, including specialized care, highlighting those that need specific knowledge and, sometimes, focused on aspects that are not so widely disseminated, such as stomatherapy.<sup>13-15</sup>

It is emphasized that, recently, the Federal Council of Nursing published Resolution 568/2018,<sup>15</sup> which deals with the regulation of the operation of Nursing offices and clinics, favoring the autonomous action of nurses, expanding assistance to nursing clients at the individual, collective and home levels, supporting, in addition, the role of the stomatherapist in these spaces. Thus, there are new possibilities for carrying out the specialist's work, giving rise to professional independence and differentiated care, from a new perspective.

Another aspect that emerged from the interviews was access to differentiated technologies for care in stomatherapy. Products, dressings and equipment used to care for skin lesions have diversified and become more advanced in scientific and technological terms, which allows for a faster, less complicated and less damaging healing process for the patients, when well indicated.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, there are dressings that act as debridants, or in preventing infections, as well as products for hygiene and antisepsis, and those that act when there is an associated infection. Anyway, there are bold technologies that favor excellent care, as long as the professional has knowledge about them and knows how to indicate them, as well as replace them, as the patient's health situation changes. It is also noteworthy that the technologies in Nursing care are available for the three areas of operation

of stomatherapy, although not all have been mentioned by the graduates.<sup>16,17</sup>

On the other hand, it is known that the Nursing team needs materials in adequate quantity and quality to provide satisfactory care. When this does not occur, there is harmful interference in the work process of these professionals, as the workers are aware that they could use better quality products and equipment to provide faster improvement in the patient.<sup>4,5,16,17</sup>

In this sense, it is emphasized that the majority of the public institutions have been undergoing profound scrapping, which is directly related to the neoliberal ideas in the health sector, since neoliberalism defends the downsizing of the public machine; therefore, there is less transfer of funds to public health. Thus, resources for health have decreased, making professionals in the area face the great challenge of finding new measures to coordinate scarce resources, in order to direct the efficiency of use and offer safe assistance to the population.<sup>3-5,8</sup>

It is known that, in general, in the Brazilian scenario there is, mainly in public health networks, an erroneous dimensioning of human resources, which weakens and makes it difficult for nurses and staff to assist patients. Many institutions operate with a reduced number of Nursing professionals, which results in work overload and, sometimes, illness in and by work in these individuals.<sup>3-5,8</sup>

The insufficiency of nurses in health units deserves to be highlighted in academic research studies, and the findings of this study are in line with others that signal Nursing as one of the professions with a high risk of stress and illness, since it is greatly hampered by the lack of adequate dimensioning of Human Resources.<sup>3-5,8</sup>

When it comes to specialized human resources, the situation is even more delicate. Public tenders that offer specific vacancies for specialist nurses are scarce since, usually, the positions are for general practitioners. And, as an effect of the neoliberal model, the occurrence of public tenders is increasingly scarce, which compromises the replacement of vacancies, resulting in non-occupation of vacancies that are necessary for the good functioning of the work process.<sup>4</sup>

In the private context, a very different situation is not experienced. Also as a reflection of neoliberalism, temporary vacancies and/or offers of remuneration incompatible with the activity to be performed are increasingly emerging. This means that there is high turnover in the workplace, favoring the maintenance of professionals in institutions.<sup>3-5,8</sup>

Although stomatherapy is a relatively new specialty in Nursing, it has been gaining space and prominence among the health professionals, as it is an area of activity in expansion among nurses.<sup>2,16,17</sup> In addition, due to the increase in the number of people with stomas, wounds and incontinence, the assistance to these individuals has been gaining significance at the national level, thus valuing stomatherapist nurses, making them professionals with a fundamental role in the rehabilitation process.<sup>18</sup>

It is recognized, however, that in Brazil there is no culture of valuing Nursing specialties, as in other categories, a factor that

contributes to the fact that stomatherapy is not yet as widely disseminated in the health services.<sup>1,2,10,11</sup>

It is noteworthy that stomatherapy is a relatively young specialty in the Brazilian context; therefore, it does not yet have a well-anchored historical basis between the health professionals and the general population. It also has terminology similar to a specialty of dentistry – Stomatology – whose objective is the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of diseases of the mouth and attached structures, consequently producing some degree of confusion.<sup>2,16</sup>

It is revealed that stomatherapy, despite being an expanding specialty, still presents a restricted field for the absorption of postgraduate nurses, partly due to the lack of public tenders essentially aimed at specialist positions and to the lack of knowledge of many health professionals and of the general population about the competences and skills that this specialist has.<sup>19</sup> As a result, there is still underutilization of stomatherapists in the field of health promotion, prevention of worsening situations, treatment and rehabilitation of people with wounds, stoma and incontinence.

Many stomatherapists who work in the job market end up being absorbed within the institution itself; however, they often do not receive a salary increase after graduation. Others, due to the autonomy provided by stomatherapy, work with home care and participate in work cooperatives that, in turn, do not give them labor rights, such as 13<sup>th</sup> salary, sickness benefit and paid holidays. Some of these difficulties, associated with the restriction of jobs in stomatherapy, are related to the current neoliberal context.<sup>2</sup>

In this sense, the configuration of the nurses' labor market follows the logic of reduction of or inexistent labor rights, favoring a change in the pattern of the composition of the salaried workforce to precarious work, which causes a decrease in work opportunities. In addition, temporary work is introduced as part of the flexible labor strategy, resulting in job insecurity and increased worker turnover.<sup>3-5,8</sup>

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION FOR THE PRACTICE**

The study analyzed the practicalities and difficulties experienced by post-graduates of a Stomatherapy Course, considering their performance as a specialist in the world of work. As a result, it was verified that the practicalities were related to the recognition of the specialist; autonomy; professional ascension and growth; the knowledge acquired through specialization; and the availability of care technologies to carry out the professional practice.

With regard to the hindering factors, the participants pointed out the lack of human resources, the scarcity of materials, and the unfavorable institutional policy. Difficulties which predominantly refer to the political-economic configuration of the world of work, whose foundations are based on the neoliberal ideology, which focuses on reducing State spending, thus, making little investment in policies for social welfare.

The present study contributes to highlighting and valuing nurses who are specialists in Stomatherapy. In this sense, it was

evidenced that these professionals perform several essential functions in the care of patients with stomas, wounds and anal and urinary incontinences. In addition, knowledge has been advanced by enumerating and discussing the practicalities and difficulties for the insertion and maintenance of this specialist in the work scene, which is permeated by the precariousness imposed by neoliberalism. In addition, data were presented that favor the development of strategies and measures to minimize the difficulties of the stomatherapist's professional practice.

The limitation of the present study was the fact that it investigated graduates of only one Specialization Course in Stomatherapy, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, which reduces the scope of the results learned, since a single reality was analyzed. Future research studies, with greater coverage, contemplating other national regions are potential to follow up on the findings of this study. However, it is understood that this research may encourage similar studies in other locations, allowing for comparisons and regional distances.

## **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS:**

Study design. Carolina Cabral Pereira da Costa. Norma Valéria Dantas de Oliveira Souza.

Data collection or production. Carolina Cabral Pereira da Costa. Norma Valéria Dantas de Oliveira Souza.

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