Making the hard decisions: Ethical care decisions in wartime nursing

Janice Agazio, PhD, CRNP, RN, FAANP, FAAN, The Catholic University of America
Petra Goodman, PhD, RN, WHNP-BC, FAANP The Catholic University of America
Acknowledgements

- This research was sponsored by the TriService Nursing Research Program, Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences; however, the information or content and conclusions do not necessarily represent the official position or policy of, nor should any official endorsement be inferred by, the TriService Nursing Research Program, Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.
Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the ethical issues occurring in military nursing practice during wartime deployments.
• Lack of research regarding how military nurses have managed ethical issues during deployments since 2001 in Afghanistan and Iraq

• Studies among civilian nurses have linked consequences of moral distress to negative impact upon nurses.

• Moral distress has been associated with burn out, compassion fatigue, and disinterest in the provision of quality patient care
Original Study Methods

• **Design**: Descriptive qualitative/Grounded theory

• **Sample**: Active duty, reserve, and retired nurse corps officers who were deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation New Dawn

• **Instrumentation**: Demographics and focused interview

• **Data Analysis**: Constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) Thematic Analysis
Current Study Methods

- Secondary analysis of data collected in
  - Nursing Practice Challenges During Wartime and Peacekeeping Operations, No2-026
  - Management of Ethical issues by Military Nurses during wartime, N11-C03
  - Framed by the International Council of Nurses *Code of Ethics for Nurses*
  - Thematic analysis of ethical issues noted in both studies
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Army Nursing Practice study</th>
<th>Ethical issues study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No of participants</td>
<td>N=77</td>
<td>N=34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age</td>
<td>38.7 (25-57 years)</td>
<td>44.3 (26-67 yrs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Males 42%</td>
<td>Males 27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Females 58%</td>
<td>Females 73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of time nursing</td>
<td>13 years (1-33 years)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of years in military</td>
<td>5.9 years (2-24 years)</td>
<td>17 years (4-30 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military services</td>
<td>Army 100%</td>
<td>Army 50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Air Force 26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Navy 24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Component</td>
<td>AD 92%</td>
<td>AD 79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reserve 8%</td>
<td>Reserve 12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Retired 9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deployment locations</td>
<td>Iraq 72%</td>
<td>Iraq 59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Afghanistan 2%</td>
<td>Afghanistan 53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Both Wartime and OOTW 25%</td>
<td>Both *15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ICN Code of Ethics for Nurses

• Four fundamental responsibilities
  • Promote health
  • Prevent illness
  • Restore health
  • Alleviate suffering

• Nursing: “respect for human rights, including cultural rights, the right to life and choice, to dignity, and to be treated with respect”

• Care is “respectful of and unrestricted by considerations of age, colour, creed, culture, disability or illness, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, politics, race, or social status.”
Elements of the Code as Framework

- Nurses and people
- Nurses and practice
- Nurses and the profession
- Nurses and co-workers
Nurses and people

• primary responsibility is to people requiring nursing care
• promotes environment in which human rights, values, customs and spiritual beliefs.....are respected
• culturally appropriate
• advocates for equity and social justice in resource allocation, access to health care, and other social and economic services
• demonstrates professional values.....
Nurses and people

...primary responsibility is to people requiring nursing care

“Always doing good for the patients, or doing no harm was always our mainstay, regardless of status, i.e. being enemy combatant, coalition force, local national, whatever the case may be...”

....demonstrates professional values.....

[Giving advice to someone deploying] I would remind them why they’re in the medical field and basically emphasize what our professional ....responsibilities and ethics and values and all those things are....
Nurses and people

...promotes environment in which human rights, values, customs and spiritual beliefs.....are respected

....culturally appropriate

“Nurses have saved more lives than can be imagined. Over there, I could speak to that happening on several occasions where nurses had to keep going to different physicians to advocate for the patient.”

Regarding post-mortem care in Muslim tradition: “They were human beings and they deserved that respect and care...as Muslims, they have a timeline where they need to be buried, that sort of thing...”

“Everyone is a human being and they all deserve the best.”
Nurses and people

...advocates for equity and social justice in resource allocation, access to health care, and other social and economic services

“Our role is [that] we are advocates to the patient always.”

“What if there is a mass casualty and we don’t have the supplies to care for our troops if we use too many for this patient?”

“The Iraqis, we gave them good care, I’m not saying that we didn’t give them good care; it’s just that more corners were probably cut with the supplies because supplies were a bigger issue.”
Nurses and practice

- accountability...maintaining competence
- maintains standard of personal health
- uses judgement regarding individual competence when accepting and delegating responsibility
- maintains standard of personal conduct
- safety, dignity, and rights of people
- maintain practice culture promoting ethical behavior and open dialogue
Nurses and practice

.....accountability...maintaining competence

“...we had a couple who should not have been deployed in the first place....their mental capacity wasn’t there whether it be from a knowledge or anxiety standpoint....having to worry about if we’re going to have the people there to actually do the job”

“Just taking care of the pediatric patients was important for the population over there.”

“You know you always want [to know] even though I felt secure in my skills and my ability to do what the Army pays me to do, I always wonder if it’s going to be good enough. Is it going to be enough? Am I making a difference? You always have those self-concerns.”
Nurses and practice

....maintains standard of personal conduct

“I think what is important honestly is to acknowledge that you do have biases. To acknowledge, hand to God, that if an EPW and a soldier roll up in here at the same time, I’m going to want to shove a needle in that guy’s neck, but you don’t. You don’t because [as] the healthcare professional, you have to live by a different standard that everyone is a human being and they all deserve your best”

“I think there is an opportunity to say “Where can I grow as a person from this?”
Nurses and practice

…..uses judgement regarding individual competence when accepting and delegating responsibility

“I’m not going to pretend to be something I’m not. I’m well aware of my limitations. I’m well aware of what is expected of me”

Nurses and the profession

• ....active in developing and sustaining a core of professional values
• ...assumes the major role in determining and implementing acceptable standards of clinical nursing practice, management, research and education
• ....maintaining safe, equitable social and economic working conditions in nursing
Nurses and the profession

....active in developing and sustaining a core of professional values

“As far as psychologically, I just, again, I had to think of what am I going to do to remove myself from a bad situation. If you take care of an EPW, is it better to take care of an EPW because you don’t work on ten GIs or is it better to work on a GI because you are not wasting your time and money and effort on an EPW? Well, you just can’t think that way. You are here to do a job. You do your job. Do it well.
Nurses and the profession

...assumes the major role in determining and implementing acceptable standards of clinical nursing practice, management, research and education

“It really falls on leadership to bring a soldier’s moral compass to the situation”
Nurses and the profession

....maintaining safe, equitable social and economic working conditions in nursing

“There was a lot of stress, a lot of call for mass cal [mass causalities], and I know that some of the leaders over there, they got pretty stressed out. When you start acting up as, you know, barking orders and telling people what to do left and right, and treat them like they are morons, they don’t know what they are doing, people get very resentful.”

“...that woman truly supported her people 100%. And she truly lived by that. It wasn’t just somebody who said it. It was by somebody who did it. And in her absence, if you made a decision, she supported you on it.”
Nurses and co-workers

• ...sustains a collaborative and respectful relationship with co-workers....

• ...takes action to safeguard...when their health is endangered by a co-worker or any other person

• ...takes appropriate action to support and guide co-workers to advance ethical conduct
Nurses and co-workers

...sustains a collaborative and respectful relationship with co-workers...

“everyday we did a team huddle....I would take people that were coming on....and say, okay, give me your thoughts....

“For me, my practice advanced more there than here because all of the doctors do the majority of the things here. Over there they are relying on you at the bedside to make decisions and notify them as soon as possible.”

Photo: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Iranian_volunteers_for_Iran-Iraq_War_%282%29.jpg
Nurses and co-workers

...takes appropriate action to support and guide co-workers to advance ethical conduct

“a lot of what I was doing was having to keep empowering my staff and keep building up my staff and keep trying to tell them that you’re doing the right thing and you are caring for all the patients here just as you would care for anybody and they really did”

When we were actually providing care, everybody was cohesive, all specialists in our particular areas, and we all had a high level of knowledge of nursing. None of us were fresh, none of us were green; we all had at least 6 years of nursing experience under us. We meshed well together, and we provided great care”

“We were going to make the best of it, we’re going to stick tight, and we’re going to do well. That’s exactly what we did.”
Nurses and co-workers

….takes action to safeguard…when their health is endangered by a co-worker or any other person

“I understand the leadership was concerned about the safety of the unit but at the same time, they were more detrimental, I felt, to the US/Iraqi relationships”

“You have to prepare yourself mentally because other people just—you see these people that you know are gung ho, Rambo type, but when they came there, they just broke. They did everything they could do to go home.”

“Some just couldn’t handle it and did everything they can—they used drugs and they confessed to it.”
Strategies

• Dynamic and meaningful education before, during, after
• Leadership development in supporting staff in ethical issue decision making and debriefing
• Build atmosphere of open dialogue and ethical conduct
• Educate staff in supporting delivery of care that respects human rights, and is sensitive to values and customs
• Interprofessional dialogue to promote ethical care delivery
Implications

• Inform military and nursing leadership about the types and effects of ethical issues occurring during wartime military nursing practice.

• Develop an “ethical decision tool kit” regarding ethical issues for deployed nurses.

• More visibility for ethics education both military and non-military
