Codes of ethics set forth standards of ethical conduct for nurses. However nurses involved in wartime operations, or disasters, may often have their moral compass challenged by the patient care decisions necessary under adverse conditions. Reverse triage, resource allocation, and promotion of patient autonomy present multiple challenges to meeting commonly applied ethical principles. This study used the ICN code of ethics as a framework to organize the ethical issues emerging from wartime nursing.

This paper represents a secondary analysis of two studies using thematic analysis to identify ethical issues encountered by military nurses during the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Data were collected during focused interviews from 111 military nurses.

Across both studies issues as resource allocation; patient triage; cultural differences; and equitable treatment for all emerged as challenges. Nurses were at a loss at times about how to best manage the situations and recommended more education in ethical decision making before, during, and after deployment as a debriefing strategy. Similar issues have been documented in military and disaster literature indicating such challenges are not limited to the recent conflicts but cross time and location. By better understanding how nurses define, assess, and manage the ethical situations they encounter in wartime nursing practice, military nurses can better prepare for future conflicts; provide mentorship and targeted education to reduce feelings of moral distress; and promote ethical decision making to promote outcomes in accordance with nursing’s ethical codes.