Clinical Knowledge Development: Continuity of Care of Wounded Service members: An Ethical Perspective

Patricia Watts Kelley, PhD, FNP-BC, GNP-BC, FAANP,FAAN
Professor & Director of Veterans to Bachelor in Nursing Program
Duquesne University School of Nursing, Pittsburgh, PA

This presentation reports the findings of study of first person accounts of experiential learning of nurses caring for wounded service members and accounts of wounded service members’ (WSMs) memories of their care experience from point of injury in the combat zone through rehabilitation. Descriptive interpretive, ethnographic methods were used and data were collected via semi-structured private interviews with individuals or small groups: 235 nurses (Army, Navy, AF, and Federal and VA nurses and 67 WSM’s (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine and National Guard). Interviews elicited narrative examples of nurses’ caregiving experiences and the injury, care, and rehabilitation experiences of the WSMs. Ethical questions resolved around 6 themes: resources/allocation; service issues; military nursing core values; nursing’s Code of Ethics; caring for the enemy; and need for follow-up/closing the loop.

Military medical personnel (soliders and their healthcare providers) reported extremely difficult ethical dilemmas related to the delivery of care in austere and dangerous environments according to the military code of war and rules of engagement while protecting themselves and their patients, service members, civilians, military combatants and insurgents.

Ethical challenges are not always resolved by the use of ethical reasoning processes. Some ethical dilemmas, explicited by study subjects, were ethically insoluble dilemmas. Courses that address ethical decision-making processes that address ethical dilemmas in poorly structured environments and integrate and accept decisions made in the war situation.