Evaluating Dual Agency in Nursing Practice: How to Make a Choice of Right Action

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This presentation will use case based learning to evaluate ethical decision-making in nursing practice settings where there are competing ethical obligations. Three examples will be discussed and one case will be fully evaluated.

1) A military nurse is asked to perform force-feeding of a detainee who is on a self-imposed hunger strike. Is this for the benefit of the patient, the military, or aligned with the health care providers professional ethical obligations?

2) A corrections nurse is asked to participate in security activities such as hostage negotiations or punitive disciplinary procedures. Could this type of action negatively affect the nurse-patient relationship?

3) A sexual assault nurse examiner is asked to collect evidence from an incoherent victim who is unable to give consent. It appears that there may be competing roles as the nurse is working as a health care professional, but also under the auspices of the police department. Is the nurse’s duty to the patient or to law enforcement?

How does one consider professional nursing ethics in a setting that demands one practice, but professional or moral obligations demand another ethical action? How does a health care practitioner make a choice of right action? In these circumstances, healthcare providers are often forced to make time-sensitive ethical decisions weighing principles of beneficence, non-malfeasance, justice and the respect for autonomy. The discussion will focus on ethical decision-making and moral courage in situations with competing professional or moral obligations.