Guest Editorial

In Harm’s Way

The Legacy of Wartime Nursing

I am writing this guest editorial on the first day of the declared war with Iraq, when radio and television coverage of the event is, of course, wall to wall, and every perspective imaginable is being broadcast on the history, impact, and outcome of this war. By the time this is published in JPN, I hope the war is officially over, and the world is beginning a process of ensuring that state-sponsored, organized, or political terrorism of any kind cannot happen anywhere again. Of course, I am enough of a realist to understand that individual cruelty, brutality, and meanness directed at children and weak, unprotected, and oppressed individuals in the world will go on, as long as we continue as a human species. But, I want to offer another perspective on this war, one that I feel needs to be shared and recognized, declared and marveled at.

It is that, once again, nurses deliberately have placed themselves in harm’s way to protect and preserve others. As I write this, I realized that young women and men, nurses and officers in the military, have been deployed to be ready and available where and when needed, which is everywhere and anywhere that our soldiers have been hurt or are in danger.
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Nurses at this moment are being dropped into sites in and around Iraq and are carrying semi-automatic rifles and stethoscopes, hefting 60-pound backpacks and wearing heavy Kevlar® helmets, as they rapidly create fully-staffed mobile health care, emergency, and surgical units for the casualties they know will come.

NURSES' ROLES IN PAST WARS

Nurses have been doing this in one form or another for centuries, even millennia. Nurses have been present and deliberately placing themselves in harm's way in every plague, pestilence, war, and crisis since such events first were recorded. For example, I could begin with the Athenian historian Thucydides, who described the deaths of those who had stayed to nurse the dying during the great plague of the Peloponnesian War in the fourth century B.C.E. (Grundy, 1948). By the third century C.E., the Parobolani Brotherhood, a group of a few hundred men at best, voluntarily nursed the sick and cared for the dying during the great bubonic plague in Alexandria. Their name is derived from the Greek, para-ballethai ten zoen (i.e., casting their fates), for their risking their lives by exposing themselves to contagious diseases (The Catholic Encyclopedia, 1911).

By the time of the Crusades in the 15th century, the nurse-knights of St. John placed the Maltese Cross on their tunics and shields on the sides of their wagons when they patrolled Jerusalem to pick up the wounded, dead, and dying and transport them back to their hospital, which was the only hospice from a war that lasted, in one form or another, for centuries. I like to think that they created the first ambulance.

Florence Nightingale took a contingent of 38 young women to Scutari during the Crimean War after she received a plea of "just help" from her friend Sidney Herbert. Nightingale then proceeded to revolutionize the care of war-wounded individuals in a place overwhelmed with infectious diseases, with little more than soap and water and a powerful conviction (Bullough, Bullough, & Stanton, 1990).

Two thousand women, including Louisa May Alcott and Dorothea Dix, served as volunteer nurses in military hospitals on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line in the American Civil War. Harriet Tubman, another volunteer, risked her life to serve as a conductor on the Underground Railroad and as a spy and scout for the Union Army. Clara Barton insisted on traveling to the front lines "while the battle raged" to treat wounded soldiers (Civil War Nurses, n.d., ¶6).

Clara Louise Maas, a nurse born in 1876, died of yellow fever in Cuba after serving as a live subject in a series of experiments to determine its cause (Knollmueller, 1985). In 1911, an Australian nurse named Elizabeth Kenney began a revolution in the treatment of polio by treating the victims of this contagious disease with a series of moist heat and exercises in an era when the cause and prevention of polio were unknown (Cohn, 1975).

In addition, nurses participated in every war of the last century, serving as flight nurses, Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (MASH) nurses, surgical nurses, and medical evacuation nurses in hospitals on and near the front lines and back in military hospitals in the United States and Europe. Between wars, nurses continued to serve on the front lines in the troubled areas of the world, such as Beirut, Sudan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Ethiopia, Somalia, Nigeria, Kuwait, Serbia, Chechnya, Israel, and Palestine.

TURNING CARING INTO ACTION

Of course, nurses have done remarkable things throughout history. However, our profession is unique not because we care, although so much has been written about nursing and hearing, but because we do something with our caring. We turn our caring into action. "We use it to succor, calm, ease, protect, and heal. Now especially my thoughts and prayers are with the women and men who risk trauma to nurse traumatized individuals and who daily transcend their own fears to safeguard the lives and well-being of others.

REFERENCES

Cohn, V. (1975). Sister Elizabeth Kenney, the woman who challenged the doctors. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press.

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