

## **Paper Session D1: High Risk Issues in Women's Health**

### ***Women's Health and Hygiene Experiences While Deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan***

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To describe women's health and hygiene experiences of U.S. military nurses deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Since 2003 the U.S. has deployed military nurses to war zones supporting U.S. and coalition forces. Nurses have worked in field hospitals, mobile surgical units, and on aeromedical aircraft. To date, very little has been reported about women's health and hygiene issues while deployed.

Descriptive phenomenology answered the question, "What are the health and hygiene issues experienced by deployed female nurses?" Descriptive phenomenology seeks to describe the experience in terms of essential structures embedded in human phenomena. Participants were recruited from active duty and reserve components of the U.S. forces deployed from 2003-2010. Snowball sampling was used in this purposive sample. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or by telephone. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Analytic procedures from Colaizzi (1978) were used with the intention to preserve the uniqueness of each experience while capturing essential relationships among statements.

Themes articulated were: toileting and showering challenges; various gynecological, urinary tract, and dermatological infections; menstrual cycle issues; contraceptive methods and unintended pregnancy; and the impact of women's health and hygiene on participants' mental health.

Wartime deployment posed a significant challenge to women's health. Austere living and working conditions affected the nurses activities of daily living and their quality of life. Experiences and lessons learned should be shared with nurses deploying in future years.