

Ethical 'Spaces': A Critical Analysis of the Medical, Ethical and Legal Complexities in the Treatment and Care of Unidentified and Critically Incapacitated Victims Following a Disaster

Authors : D. Osborn, L. Easthope

Abstract : The increasing threat of 'marauding terror,' utilising improvised explosive devices and firearms, has focused the attention of policy makers and emergency responders once again on the treatment of the critically injured patient in a highly volatile scenario. Whilst there have been significant improvements made in the response and lessons learned from recent disasters in the international disaster community there still remain areas of uncertainty and a lack of clarity in the care of the critically injured. This innovative, longitudinal study has at its heart the aim of using ethnographic methods to 'slow down' the journey such patients will take and make visible the ethical complexities that 2017 technologies, expectations and over a decade of improved combat medicine techniques have brought. The primary researcher, previously employed in the hospital emergency management environment, has closely followed responders as they managed casualties with life-threatening injuries. Ethnographic observation of Exercise Unified Response in March 2016, exposed the ethical and legal 'vacuums' within a mass casualty and fatality setting, specifically the extrication, treatment and care of critically injured patients from crushed and overturned train carriages. This article highlights a gap in the debate, evaluation, planning and response to an incident of this nature specifically the incapacitated, unidentified patients and the ethics of submitting them to the invasive 'Disaster Victim Identification' process. Using a qualitative ethnographic analysis, triangulating observation, interviews and documentation, this analysis explores the gaps and highlights the next stages in the researcher's pathway as she continues to explore with emergency practitioners some of this century's most difficult questions in relation to the medico-legal and ethical challenges faced by emergency services in the wake of new and emerging threats and medical treatment expectations.

Keywords : ethics, disaster, Disaster Victim Identification (DVI), legality, unidentified

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