

U.S. Medical Advances May Mask Wars' Human Cost

Wed Dec 8, 2004 05:02 PM ET

By Greg Frost

BOSTON (Reuters) - The toll on U.S. troops of war in Iraq and Afghanistan may be obscured by dramatic advances in battlefield medicine that allow more soldiers to survive combat injuries than ever before, according to a report in The New England Journal of Medicine.

"This can no longer be described as a small or contained conflict. But a far larger proportion of soldiers are surviving their injuries," author Atul Gawande, a Harvard professor and surgeon at Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital, said in the article.

U.S. combat deaths in Iraq topped 1,000 this week.

Gawande suggested fundamental changes in treating wounded troops had altered the old calculus for measuring a war's intensity. As a result, it could be misleading to focus only on combat deaths to gauge the level of fighting in Iraq.

Military doctors and nurses face significant challenges in Iraq, including a mysterious drug-resistant infection plaguing wounded soldiers and blast injuries that have caused an "unprecedented burden" of mangled limbs, he said.

Only about 10 percent of U.S. soldiers injured in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan have died, Gawande said. That compared to about 25 percent for American soldiers injured while fighting in Korea, Vietnam and even during the Gulf War.

The flip side, however, is that **for every 10 combat deaths, it must be assumed that about 10 times as many troops were injured, he said.**

"When we hear that 10 soldiers were killed in fighting, we all draw a mental picture about what that means," Gawande said in an interview. "But you have to multiply that number by 10 to find out how many (soldiers) were injured ... and that suggests a very different level of violence."

'REMARKABLE' IMPROVEMENTS

Gawande based his analysis on discussions with military surgical teams and **official figures showing over 10,700 U.S. troops killed or wounded fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan.**

That is more than the number of Americans killed or wounded in the U.S. Revolutionary War and the first five years of the Vietnam War,

but far below the hundreds of thousands of U.S. casualties in World Wars One and Two and the U.S. Civil War.

Gawande attributed part of the success in preventing combat deaths to better troop equipment like Kevlar vests.

But he gave most credit to changes in the military's triage system and surgical teams that are leaner, more mobile and closer to battle -- a "fundamental departure from previous wars."

The improvements are all the more remarkable given a shortage of medical personnel, Gawande said. Only 120 Army general surgeons are on active duty and a similar number in reserve to support troops fighting in Iraq.

Some troops are surviving the loss of three limbs -- which previously would have been "uniformly fatal," Gawande said.

The Department of Defense referred questions about Gawande's article to the U.S. Army. The army disputed suggestions that the human cost of the war is being obscured, but acknowledged a relative increase in the number of injured limbs among U.S. troops in Iraq.

Army medical officials said in a statement that extremity injuries are typically the most common in wartime, accounting for two-thirds of all wounds in most previous conflicts.

"However, the severity of the extremity wounds appears to have increased during this conflict," the statement said. It said this was most likely because similarly injured soldiers would have previously died from associated mortal wounds to the abdomen and chest.

No official figures are available for the numbers of Iraqi dead. Estimates have ranged from some 14,000 to 100,000 civilians and around 5,000 troops in the war.

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