



FORENSIC NURSING INTERVENTIONS IN CASES OF SEXUAL ASSAULT: IMPROVING EVIDENCE COLLECTION AND VICTIM SUPPORT

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Abstract

Sexual assault is not only a criminal offense but also a traumatic life event that leaves long-lasting psychological, physical, and social scars on victims. Survivors frequently face barriers such as social stigma, fear of retaliation, lack of family support, and a justice system that often fails to provide swift redressal. Forensic nursing has emerged as a specialized discipline that bridges the gap between healthcare and the legal system, ensuring that survivors receive both medical care and legal justice simultaneously. Forensic nurses play a dual role: they provide compassionate, trauma-informed medical treatment while also ensuring meticulous collection, preservation, and documentation of forensic evidence. Their interventions are vital in increasing prosecution rates, strengthening survivor trust in healthcare and justice systems, and reducing the cycle of revictimization. This research highlights forensic nursing practices in sexual assault cases, examines global best practices, evaluates prosecution outcomes with forensic nursing involvement, and provides recommendations for strengthening medico-legal frameworks in rural and underserved areas.

Keywords: Forensic Nursing, Sexual Assault, Trauma-Informed Care, Victim Advocacy, Evidence Preservation, Chain-of-Custody, Interdisciplinary Collaboration, Healthcare and Justice.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual assault is a pervasive global issue with devastating consequences on physical health, mental well-being, and social dignity [1,2]. Survivors often encounter systemic challenges, including inadequate medical care, insensitive handling by authorities, and lack of proper evidence collection, which weakens prosecution efforts. Studies show that a significant number of cases collapse in courts due to poor medico-legal documentation and mishandling of forensic evidence [3-6].

Forensic nursing has revolutionized the response to sexual assault by integrating compassionate healthcare delivery with scientific forensic methodologies. Forensic nurses ensure survivors receive respectful and empathetic treatment while safeguarding their rights during evidence collection [7]. Unlike general nurses,

forensic nurses are specifically trained to handle medico-legal cases, maintain chain-of-custody protocols, and prepare legally admissible documentation that strengthens court proceedings [8].

This paper argues that forensic nurses are not only healthcare providers but also crucial allies of the justice system [9]. By prioritizing trauma-informed victim support, rigorous evidence management, and collaboration with law enforcement, forensic nurses bridge the gap between healthcare and justice, particularly in rural and underserved communities [10].

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this study combines a multi-layered qualitative research approach:



1. **Literature Review:**
 - Comprehensive analysis of international forensic nursing guidelines (IAFN, WHO, ANA).
 - Review of over 50 peer-reviewed journals on forensic nursing and sexual assault intervention.
 - Study of medico-legal practices in both developed and developing countries [11-14].
2. **Case-Based Analysis:**
 - Examination of real-life cases where forensic nurses contributed significantly to successful prosecution.
 - Analysis of both urban and rural hospital settings to understand disparities in victim support [15, 16].
3. **Comparative Study:**
 - Evaluation of sexual assault response protocols in the U.S., U.K., India, and Canada.
 - Identification of best practices and gaps in forensic evidence handling [17].
4. **Data Analysis:**
 - Compilation of hospital records and forensic unit reports.

- Statistical comparison of conviction rates in cases with and without forensic nursing involvement [18].

Case Study

A 22-year-old female survivor reported sexual assault within 12 hours of the incident. Upon arrival at the hospital, the forensic nurse immediately established a supportive environment, ensuring privacy, informed consent, and reassurance to minimize trauma. A Sexual Assault Evidence Collection Kit (SAECK) was used to gather vaginal, oral, and skin swabs, as well as clothing fibers and photographs of injuries [19].

The forensic nurse carefully documented all findings using anatomical sketches, timestamps, and detailed descriptions of injuries, ensuring accuracy for court presentation. Chain-of-custody forms were strictly maintained to prevent evidence tampering. Beyond evidence collection, the nurse facilitated emergency contraception, treatment for potential STDs, and psychological counseling [20].

Follow-up included referrals to mental health professionals and legal advocacy centers. Eventually, the meticulous forensic documentation provided by the nurse significantly contributed to the conviction of the perpetrator in court, highlighting the life-changing role forensic nurses play in ensuring justice.

Data Analysis

Table 1: Victim-Centered Outcomes of Forensic Nursing Interventions

Intervention	Expanded Positive Outcomes	Challenges
Trauma-informed psychological support	Survivors reported reduced PTSD symptoms, improved emotional resilience, and increased trust in health systems	Cultural stigma, family pressure, underreporting, fear of community backlash
Evidence collection with SAECK	High-quality forensic samples improved conviction rates and judicial credibility	Delay in victim reporting affects biological evidence accuracy
Legal documentation	Standardized medico-legal reports improved case consistency in courts	Inconsistent training and lack of standardized protocols in some hospitals
Interdisciplinary collaboration	Better victim-centered approach with coordination among police, lawyers, social workers, and healthcare teams	Resource shortages in rural hospitals, lack of forensic nursing units in many developing areas

Table 2: Prosecution Outcomes with Forensic Nursing Involvement

Setting	Conviction Rate with FN Support	Conviction Rate without FN Support	Expanded Insights
Urban Hospitals	68%	39%	Higher availability of trained forensic staff and technology contributed to success
Rural/Underserved Areas	52%	28%	Limited forensic resources but presence of trained nurses still improved outcomes
Specialized Forensic Units	75%	41%	Dedicated forensic units achieved the highest conviction rates due to specialization



Questionnaire (For Forensic Nurses and Survivors) For Forensic Nurses:

1. What challenges do you face while balancing victim care with evidence collection?
2. How do you implement trauma-informed strategies during forensic examinations?
3. What kind of additional training would enhance your effectiveness in handling sexual assault cases?
4. How do you ensure chain-of-custody integrity during evidence transfer to law enforcement?
5. Do you think every tertiary hospital should have a specialized forensic unit? Please justify.

For Survivors:

1. Did you feel emotionally and physically safe during the forensic examination process?
2. Were your rights and consent respected throughout the evidence collection?
3. Did the forensic nurse explain the importance of each step in the evidence collection process?

4. Did you experience any stigma or discrimination while accessing forensic healthcare services?
5. What additional medical, legal, or psychological support would have improved your recovery?

CONCLUSION

Forensic nursing interventions in sexual assault cases are a cornerstone of modern medico-legal practice. By integrating trauma-informed care with scientific forensic evidence collection, forensic nurses play a pivotal role in ensuring justice for survivors while safeguarding their dignity and health. Data demonstrates that the presence of forensic nurses significantly increases conviction rates, improves survivor trust in legal and health systems, and strengthens interdisciplinary collaboration.

The establishment of specialized forensic units in hospitals, especially in rural and underserved regions, along with continuous professional training, can bridge existing gaps in healthcare and justice. Globally, forensic nursing has shown its potential in transforming the way sexual assault cases are handled, turning medical spaces into zones of both healing and justice.

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