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REVIEW PAPER

Forensic nursing in the emergency department: scope, perceived roles, and responsibilities of forensic nursing professionals

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ABSTRACT

Forensic nursing is a specialised area of healthcare that combines traditional nursing abilities with forensic expertise. Emergency rooms play a crucial role in treating victims of violence and trauma. Forensic nurses are an important link between the healthcare and legal systems. They are responsible for gathering and preserving evidence while also giving victims full care, especially in cases of sexual assault, domestic violence, and abuse. They have many jobs, such as doing thorough medical exams, providing emotional support, and working with police and lawyers to ensure that evidence is handled properly. The field is becoming more well-known in India, with its inclusion in nursing educational programmes and a focus on how important it is to transfer victim support to the healthcare system. As forensic nursing becomes more common in India, it should lead to better care for victims, better legal outcomes, less violence, and an enhanced understanding of how trauma affects victims' mental health. But to maximise its benefits in the Indian healthcare and justice systems, forensic nursing requires ongoing support, organised training, and policy reform.

Keywords: Forensic nursing; victim-centred care; trauma; evidence documentation; team-based approach.

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INTRODUCTION

The nurses in the emergency department often need to deal with the victims of traumatic injuries who suffer unintentional trauma caused by falls and accidents, as well as intentional trauma caused by assault, abuse, violence, and suicide.^{1,2} Forensic nursing is a new and very specialised field of healthcare that combines traditional nursing skills with forensic knowledge to help with complicated healthcare problems like assault, violence,

abuse, and other healthcare-related crimes by collecting and preserving vital evidence about trauma.³⁻⁵ While in the emergency department, the main focus is on saving lives and stabilising patients' conditions; another important task for the forensic nurses is to possess unique skills to provide holistic care to the victims of trauma, simultaneously documenting the crucial evidence at the time of initial history taking and physical examination to produce during the potential legal proceedings.⁶

UNDERSTANDING FORENSIC NURSING

'Forensic' refers to the application of scientific knowledge to legal problems. The term 'forensic' is derived from the Latin word 'forensis', meaning 'public debate or discussion', involving the legal system as the forum for public discussion and debate. According to the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, forensic science is used in the public and judicial systems for law enforcement purposes.⁷ Forensic science is a multifaceted discipline that involves specialities like criminalistics, digital and multimedia sciences, toxicology, odontology, engineering, pathology and biology, anthropology and physical sciences, psychiatry and behavioural sciences, etc., among many.⁷

Forensic nursing science is defined as the application of the forensic aspects of healthcare combined with the bio/psycho/social/spiritual education of the registered nurse in the scientific investigation and treatment of the trauma or death of victims and perpetrators of violence, criminal activity, and traumatic accidents by providing direct services to individual clients and consultation services to nursing, medical, and law-related agencies, and expert court testimony in areas dealing with questioned death investigative processes, adequacy of services delivery, and specialised diagnoses of specific conditions as related to nursing.⁸ The speciality combines the forensic aspects of healthcare with the scientific investigation and treatment of crime or liability-related cases.^{6,9}

As members of interdisciplinary teams in healthcare and law-related agencies, forensic nursing science has become a potent influence on the rule of law and provides collective intelligence for practice.^{9,10}

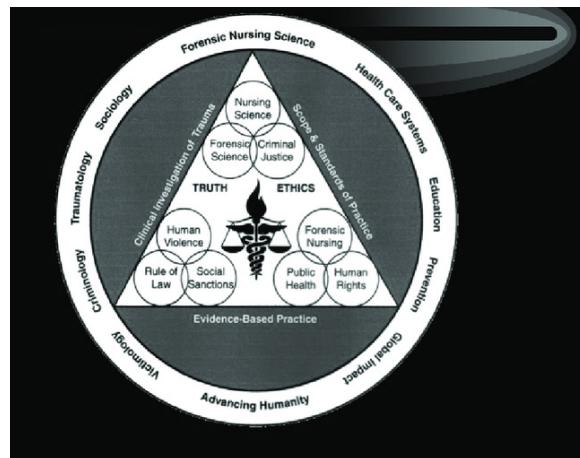


Figure 1: Integrated practice model for forensic nursing science

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

The role of forensic nursing has expanded from concerns exclusively with death investigation to incorporate the living survivors of violent crime as well as the perpetrators of criminal acts. Formal acknowledgement of forensic nursing as a sub-speciality dates back to the early 1980s, with the pioneering work of Ann Wolbert Burgess. The theoretical basis for forensic nursing was first established through a conceptual model, *the integrated practice model for forensic nursing science*, developed by Virginia Lynch (Lynch, 1990).⁸ Following Lynch's presentation, the American Academy of Forensic Sciences recognised forensic nursing as a speciality in 1991. In 1992, forensic nursing pioneers established the International Association of Forensic Nurses (IAFN). Three years later, the American Nurses Association (ANA) granted speciality status to forensic nursing.¹¹

In India, the field of forensic nursing has been on the rise over the years, owing to the growing cases of violence. This necessitates advancements in healthcare, legal reforms, progress in forensic science, and changing

societal views on crime and victim care.¹² By 2003, forensic nursing was promoted at various national-level seminars and conferences across the country. It was formally introduced as a mandatory subject in the BSc Nursing programme by the Indian Nursing Council in 2020, with support from international scholars, establishing a model for the development of forensic nursing in India.^{13,14}

SCOPE OF FORENSIC NURSING

Forensic nursing is an evolving discipline in the nursing profession. In India, with rising crime rates, the greatest promise of forensic nursing is the emergence of a new holistic approach to legal issues surrounding patient care in various healthcare settings, including hospital emergency departments, private clinics, psychiatric hospitals, correctional and rehabilitation facilities, community settings, and other forensic legal institutions. There is a growing recognition of forensic nursing's importance in bridging gaps between the criminal justice and healthcare systems. The scopes of forensic nursing are as follows:

1. The goal is to practice in hospital and community settings to identify issues that will have a legal impact on society.
2. To document injuries, collect necessary evidence and bring communities together to deal with social issues like violence, sexual abuse and maltreatment.
3. Our mission is to support the grieving relatives of victims in cases of death, misfortune, and accidents.
4. The goal is to provide direct care to victims in hospitals, community centres, jails, juvenile delinquency centres, and rehabilitation and psychiatric facilities.
5. To contribute to disaster management.
6. Work as entrepreneurs for consultation on legal cases, helping attorneys understand complex medical terminologies and the community's healthcare system.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF FORENSIC NURSES IN THE EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT

Nursing plays a crucial role in ensuring the continuity of safe, effective, and compassionate healthcare delivery through critical decision-making. Forensic nurses assume advanced nursing roles; with a strong grasp of professional and legal concepts, they deliver high-quality care within multidisciplinary teams and assert their rights when appropriate while interacting with victims of various forms of violence.^{15,16} While the safety of the living victim and the deceased victim's body remains the priority, collecting and preserving evidence from the victim should be the next priority.

According to McCracken, the ABCs of Forensic Nursing outlines the core concepts and practices for the professionals.^{17,18}

The forensic nurses should perform:

- A = Assessment of the victim
- B = Bridge the gap; liaison with various agencies
- C = Chain of custody; know the methods of evidence collection, possession and disposition.
- D = Documentation of findings
- E = Evidence
- F = Families informed properly
- G = Going to court; be prepared to provide testimony
- H = Hospital policies; know the institution's forensic protocols.
- I = Index of suspicion; be aware of signs of abuse and violence.

Additional roles and responsibilities of a forensic nurse

- **Carer:** One of the most essential roles of forensic nurses is providing compassionate care and support to victims.
- **Interdisciplinary collaboration:** forensic nurses function within multidisciplinary

teams that include physicians, law enforcement officers, attorneys, forensic pathologists, and advocates to ensure a comprehensive, victim-centered approach to care and justice.

- **Clinical forensic nursing professional:** Forensic nurses conduct comprehensive medical examinations to assess and treat injuries, collect evidence, provide counselling, and ensure the proper preservation and documentation of the findings crucial for the legal processes.⁵
- **Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE):** In cases of sexual assault, forensic nurses provide culturally and developmentally sensitive care, address survivors' emotional needs, and create a safe, nurturing environment for them. They conduct comprehensive medical examinations to assess and treat injuries, collect evidence, and provide counselling and resources for emotional recovery.¹⁹⁻²²
- **In domestic and interpersonal violence:** Forensic nurses are vital investigators and carers in cases of domestic violence, including intimate partner violence (IPV), elder abuse, child maltreatment, and other forms of violence.²³
- **Forensic mental health nursing:** In correctional and mental health settings, forensic psychiatric nurses manage individuals with mental illnesses. They assess the mental status of the victims/perpetrators, monitor treatment adherence, and contribute to rehabilitation. Their ethical role balances patient advocacy with public safety concerns.²⁴
- **Forensic nurse death investigator and postmortem analyser:** Forensic nurses work as death investigators with medical examiners to evaluate the reason for deaths, especially in sudden, unexplained, or suspicious cases.²⁵
- **Legal Nurse Consultant:** Forensic nurses collaborate with law enforcement agencies, healthcare institutions, and legal professionals to build a more effective response system to handle cases involving violence and abuse by developing protocols and procedures for the proper collection and preservation of evidence, as well as serving as expert witnesses in court proceedings.²⁶
- **Nurse educator and researcher:** Forensic nurses develop and implement orientation and continuing education programmes for staff related to forensic nursing and forensic science techniques.

IMPLICATIONS OF FORENSIC NURSING IN INDIA

Forensic nursing holds immense potential for growth within the nursing profession. It is an emerging speciality that is gradually gaining recognition and momentum in academic and healthcare sectors.^{17,22} Introducing forensic nursing practices could lead to the following outcomes:

1. **Improved victim care:** Forensic nurses provide comprehensive care to victims of violence, abuse, and trauma, addressing both medical and psychological needs for better recovery outcomes and providing efficient training to identify and manage trauma by utilising specialised knowledge in practice settings.
2. **Enhanced legal outcome:** Forensic nurses meticulously document injuries and collect evidence crucial for legal cases to provide expert testimony to influence the fairness and accuracy of judicial proceedings.
3. **Violence prevention, public education and advocacy:** Forensic nurses play a pivotal role in recognising and addressing patterns of abuse and violence. Through community education, forensic nurses raise awareness about abuse signs and the importance of fostering proactive measures against violence and abuse.

4. **Mental health promotion:** Victims of violence often endure psychological trauma. Forensic nurses offer essential mental health support, aiding victims in coping with the emotional aftermath.
5. **Improving healthcare systems by providing training and using a team-based approach:** Forensic nursing programmes improve healthcare professionals, raise the quality of care by encouraging teamwork and ensure coordinated victim support.
6. **Policy development:** Evidence and data from forensic nursing research can reform India's policies on violence prevention and victim support, guiding more effective strategies and interventions.
7. **Curriculum development:** Forensic nursing modules can be incorporated into nursing school programmes to enhance curriculum development, initiate research activities among students, improve their knowledge and expertise in the subject, and enable participation in global training programmes and certification courses.

CONCLUSION

Forensic nursing has emerged as a vital and evolving speciality within the profession, where timely clinical intervention must coexist with meticulous forensic responsibility. This review highlights the expanding scope, diverse roles, and critical responsibilities of forensic nursing professionals in addressing trauma, violence, abuse, and medico-legal cases. This is achieved through the integration of compassionate, victim-centered care with systematic methods for identifying, collecting, preserving, and documenting evidence. In the Indian context, the growing recognition of forensic nursing, its inclusion in the nursing curriculum, and increased interdisciplinary collaboration mark significant progress; however, structured training, standardised protocols, dedicated forensic nursing positions, and supportive policies remain necessary to fully realise its potential. Strengthening forensic nursing practice in emergency settings will not only improve patient outcomes and safeguard victims' rights but also contribute to more accurate legal processes, violence prevention, and an overall enhancement of the healthcare and justice systems in India.

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