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INTRODUCTION

Introduction to *JFS* Special Section on Vicarious Trauma in Forensic Scientists

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I am pleased to introduce this *JFS* Special Section on Vicarious Trauma (VT) in Forensic Scientists. The vision for this *JFS* Special Section began several years ago with the formation of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences Presidential Ad Hoc Committee for Vicarious Trauma established under Past President Laura Fulginiti in 2022–2023. Since then, the committee has been hard at work increasing the awareness of VT, burnout, secondary traumatic stress (STS), and compassion fatigue within the diverse community of forensic science practitioners. This *JFS* Special Section includes research from this committee as well as from professionals in Italy, Turkey, Australia, Pakistan, and the United States addressing the underrecognized mental health challenges and considerations in the fields of forensic medicine, digital forensics, forensic psychology/psychiatry, forensic anthropology, professionals working in crime labs and crime scene investigators, as well as organizational factors impacting VT/STS, and prevention strategies and resiliency amongst forensic scientists.

Forensic science, with its multidisciplinary nature, is at a critical intersection within the legal and criminal justice system. One that requires dedicated practitioners and scientists who abide by the scientific rigor and standards of their fields of practice. This dedication is often accompanied by exposure to psychological demands, adversarial legal pressures, ongoing engagement with human tragedy, and administrative burdens, which elevate the risk for psychological strain and trauma. The nature of the psychological impact within forensic science practitioners is underresearched, despite an increase in attention over the past several years. This *JFS* Special Section increases the awareness of the cumulative psychological toll of indirect trauma associated with the job and confirms that working in forensic sciences is inherently linked to the risk of VT/STS, from scene to lab to courtroom, regardless of the discipline.

The research presented in this *JFS* Special Section expands beyond the typical first responder studies to explore how exposure to traumatic material, both direct and indirect, and related stressors affect various specialties within the forensic sciences. This collection of articles moves the conversation beyond the old adage that stress and exposure to traumatic events are merely part of the job and recognizes the lasting impact of trauma, in various forms, as prevalent to varying degrees within the forensic science disciplines. The authors also emphasize the overarching need for organizational interventions and support, versus the individual practitioner relying solely on themselves to "tough it out" or find another career.

The impact of the work of forensic scientists has the potential for long-term implications in their mental health, and no forensic discipline is insulated from this possibility. While the nature of trauma and prevalence of the exposure varies by discipline, the realities faced by virtue of the profession are unavoidable. Romão et al. [1] investigated the experiences of forensic doctors—those performing autopsies—in Italy. Many utilized metaphorical expressions to shape their perspective on mortality and viewed their work as "art" or a "puzzle" which helped them find meaning and resiliency. Kayhan and Liman [2] discovered that autopsy technicians face more risk for burnout, especially in comparison with forensic medicine specialists in Turkey. While those in busier offices were at risk for diminished meaning in life and decreased life satisfaction.

The professionals involved in digital forensics face a different, but equally concerning, exposure to trauma by virtue of their exposure to images, video, and audio of traumatic events. One in particular is highlighted by Tyagi and Seigfried-Spellar [3] as the frequent exposure to child sexual abuse material (CSAM). Forensic analysts conducting this work experience higher psychological distress than their video and audio counterparts. Their study found that 17% of digital forensic examiners (DFE) met the diagnostic criteria for PTSD. Additionally, Seigfried-Spellar and Tyagi [4] reported on the

assessment of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences community and membership. They found that 8.4% of forensic professionals across the disciplines have probable PTSD symptoms, while female professionals reported higher levels of distress.

While VT has been studied and documented amongst mental health providers for over 20 years, forensic psychologists and psychiatrists are under studied and underrepresented in scientific literature. Their role in conducting forensic assessments subjects them to exposure to graphic descriptions of violence and the stressors of testifying in court. Wiltsie et al. [5] noted that forensic psychology expert witness' exposure to traumatic narratives is high, but protective factors such as social support and empathy did not show a statistically significant correlation with VT within this population. Conversely, Laster et al. [6] found psychological flexibility, which is the ability to remain present and engaged despite difficult thoughts and feelings, mediated the relationship between VT and burnout, suggesting it can act as a protective factor against developing burnout and VT.

Forensic anthropologists are yet another population with underdocumented traumatic exposure through both their work with human remains but also through the human narrative via frequent contact with distressed family members. Boyd et al. [7] pointed out the significant impact of the availability and utilization of social support mechanisms and its effect on the risk of developing traumatic stress. Additionally, the need for further education and training in relation to the indirect traumatic stress associated with this profession was highlighted, as well as the significance of organizational support via management/supervisor support and various programs. Waxenbaum and Pope [8] found that forensic anthropologists are most impacted by cases involving child abuse and the stress of testifying in court. The impact of the adversarial nature of the legal system and the stresses of testifying was addressed by Sarwar et al. [9]. This study highlighted the aggressive nature of courtroom testimony and how it can undermine professional confidence, contributing to burn out, especially when organizations fail to provide training for this part of the job.

While forensic professionals often exhibit resilience and employ coping strategies, individual strategies are often not enough for the long-term impact of the indirect trauma of forensic science. The theme of individual resilience runs throughout this *JFS* Special Section, and Rogers [10] argues that focusing solely on self-care and peer support absolves organizations of their responsibility for the mental health well-being of their employees. Drawing on Organization Support Theory and Organizational Justice Theory, Rogers proposes that systemic factors, such as fairness in workload distribution and leadership support, are as critical in trauma exposure in predicting employee outcomes. This perspective is reinforced by Keech and Drew [11], whose study of police forensic staff revealed that organizational and operational stressors were stronger predictors of psychological distress and burnout than the actual exposure to trauma through work. Both articles highlight the significant role played by supervisors and the organization in shaping employee outcomes.

Another forensic profession addressed in this *JFS* Special Section is crime scene investigators (CSI), and Nolan [12] discusses the structural neglect of non-sworn CSIs. Nolan identifies that these forensic professionals often lack the same benefits and inclusion as their sworn counterparts, exacerbating their risk for VT. This further supports the need for organizational involvement and commitment to the well-being of the force. Kelty et al. [13] identified occupational stress (OS) as a contributing factor to VT and burnout within forensic science professions and called for the development of a primary prevention program and education for both practitioners and administrative staff. This intervention requires a holistic approach that addresses everything from the "zero tolerance for error" culture to the pressures of the justice system, which we as forensic science professionals ultimately serve.

The compilation of articles in this *JFS* Special Section outlines the contributing factors leading to VT/STS, burnout, and compassion fatigue within the various forensic science disciplines and discusses coping mechanisms and strategies to overcome them and maintain mental well-being. One article in particular by Mack and Brooker [14] provides a possible framework via "Enhanced Trauma-Informed Policing (E-TIP)" for a path forward. E-TIP integrates trauma exposure considerations, person-centered leadership, and organizational justice. This model suggests that leadership is a critical piece for shaping how professionals experience and process trauma. Collectively, the research represented in these articles confirms that working in forensic sciences is linked to the risk of VT/STS. While each individual handles the stresses and trauma differently, there is evidence and support to suggest a shift in focus from individual coping to overall systemic wellness, building a resilient workforce to sustain the quality of scientific rigor required.

Thank you for reading this *JFS* Special Section on VT and other mental health challenges within the forensic science community. I encourage you to share it with your colleagues and promote discussion as we continually strive to be well and perform our duties with an unwavering commitment to justice.

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