



D20 Utilizing Forensic Nurses in the Postmortem Sexual Assault Examination: One Medical Examiner's Perspective

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The goal of this presentation is to demonstrate advantages of using Forensic Nurses to conduct the post mortem sexual assault examination. This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating the impact forensic nurses can have in the post mortem sexual assault examination. The forensic nurse brings to the post mortem examination a myriad of knowledge and techniques that will enhance the documentation of findings. Medical examiner/coroner offices should consider incorporating forensic nursing services into the post mortem sexual assault examination.

Sexual assault is a crime broadly characterized as any unwanted sexual contact, including rape, incest, molestation, fondling or grabbing and viewing or participating in pornography. Each state defines rape somewhat differently, but most include the following 3 criteria: 1. any vaginal, oral or anal penetration by a penis, object or other body part; 2. lack of consent, communicated by verbal or physical signs of resistance or if the victim is unable to consent by means of incapacitation because of age, disability or drug or alcohol intoxication; 3. threat of or actual use of force. For several reasons, an accurate number of sexual assaults in the United States is difficult to determine. Recent studies have shown that approximately 1 out of every 6 women in the US (18%) has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime.

In order to standardize for prosecution collection of appropriate forensic evidence in cases of rape, emergency departments have begun to routinely utilize forensic nurses and their specific training and materials. In many large centers a sexual assault examination conducted by a forensic nurse has become the standard of care. Training of forensic nurses includes evidence collection and preservation, injury identification and documentation and expert witness testimony. In addition to kit collection and a routine pelvic inspection, Toluidine Blue Dye, colposcopy photography and alternate light source use are but a few of the specialized techniques used in these cases by the forensic nurse.

In medical examiner/ coroner offices, the examination process in suspected cases of sexual assault normally involve kit collection and pelvic inspection without special attention, tools or documentation techniques. To our knowledge, the use of forensic nurses to document sexual assault in post mortem cases is a rarity. Beginning in 2002, the Harris County Medical Examiner's Office in Houston, Texas began using forensic nursing services. The major component of the forensic nurse's role is to conduct post mortem sexual assault examinations. To date, approximately thirty post mortem cases have been evaluated in our office. We will present data, including control cases, showing the types of injuries documented, laboratory results from the collection of kits and the improved identification of the subtle exam findings using Toluidine Blue Dye.

Forensic nurses, trained in a clinical environment, have extensive experience in gynecologic evaluations and examinations. They bring this background knowledge with them to the post mortem sexual assault examination and can provide a spectrum of techniques to enhance demonstration of assault-related findings. Their use augments the medical examiner/ coroner's ability to determine the role sexual assault may have played in the cause and manner of death. As expert witnesses, their testimony lends significant weight to the outcome of criminal prosecution of sexual assault/ rape homicides.

Sexual Assault, Forensic Nurses, Toluidine Blue Dye