



### D47 Improving Health Care Delivery Through Forensic Science

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The goal of this presentation is to demonstrate the value of forensic / medical evidence management within the hospital and patient care environments. This presentation will outline several cases of suspicious patient events / deaths within Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC) settings.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating that forensic education and training should be encouraged and emphasized at all levels within the hospital's chain-of-command, and position descriptions should be updated, listing specific forensic roles and responsibilities for the clinicians, supervisors and administrators.

Evidence identification, collection and preservation are becoming vitally important as forensic investigations increase within health care systems. One of the more pressing issues currently confronting the emergency departments and other patient care areas is the ability of health care workers to recognize possible forensic implications in routine patient care scenarios and the expertise to manage and secure the appropriate medical / forensic evidence.

Adverse patient events range from those causing minimal concern to extremely serious action, but the vast majority of these are not criminal in nature. Regardless, the precise identification, collection, and management of facts, data and medical evidence are critical, criminal or not. It is the duty of every health care provider to ensure a high level of quality patient care and accurate delivery of such services. This means all healthcare providers must have some level of awareness of what constitutes medico-legal significance. In addition, patients deserve a safe environment in which to receive healthcare, and healthcare providers deserve a safe place to practice. Failures to recognize and safeguard evidence in healthcare settings can result in medical errors, miscarriages of justice for victims or perpetrators, and result in lengthy, complex investigations.

Many healthcare facilities do not have adequate mechanisms in place to collect, package, and store evidentiary items. The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) has laid the groundwork for the roles of clinical forensic nurses and other health care providers within hospitals in its published scoring guidelines for patient care assessment. Additionally, the Joint Commission includes the review of organizations' activities in response to sentinel events in its accreditation process that opens the door for closer examination of what role forensic science can play in improving health care delivery.

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is a leader in recognizing forensic sciences as a tool to not only improve investigatory efforts, but as a Quality Management tool in process improvement plans. The goals set forth by VHA leadership include heightening the awareness of healthcare workers of potential forensic scenarios in everyday patient care; to establish teams of clinicians indoctrinated in forensic science who will be first responders to suspicious events; and to standardize protocols in them management of medical / forensic evidence in each patient care department.

It has been established that the vast majority of law enforcement and investigative personnel are not trained to navigate through a complicated medical or surgical area, nor do most comprehend the medical / nursing jargon commonly used within medical facilities. Clinicians who have enhanced their practice with the forensic sciences and who maintain current knowledge of the justice system requirements while exhibiting the ability to apply this expertise to health care, become the critical link between law enforcement and healthcare practice.

#### **Medical/Forensic Evidence, Suspicious Patient Events , Quality Management**