



E27 Debunking Three Myths About Rape Victims' Responses to Their Attacks

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn that, contrary to endorsed beliefs, victims of rape do not necessarily immediately report the assault, suffer severe physical or anogenital injury, or forcefully resist their attacker during the assault.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing supporting evidence, obtained from a retrospective study conducted at a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) program, that following a self-report of sexual assault, victims will seek medical care over a wide variation of time following the assault, rarely suffer moderate or severe physical or anogenital injury, and commonly do not resist their attacker throughout the assault.

Stereotypical and prejudicial misconceptions regarding sexual assault and victim responses to this type of violence continue to exist. These misconceptions are collectively referred to as rape myths. Three existing rape myths are that sexual assault victims: (1) immediately report the crime; (2) suffer severe physical and/or anogenital injuries; and, (3) forcefully resist their assailant. Failure by the lay public to understand the variability of victim response during and following a sexual assault can result in victims blaming themselves and lack of support provided to victims. In the courtroom, it can result in jurors misunderstanding that the victim did not consent and may result in not guilty verdicts for criminals. Having an expert witness provide testimony to the mythological nature of some long-held beliefs allows jurors to evaluate victim behaviors they otherwise find incomprehensible or counterintuitive.

A retrospective cohort study examining the time to seek medical care following the incident, presence of physical or anogenital injury, and level of physical resistance during the assault was conducted at Regions Hospital in St. Paul, MN, in 2011 and 2012. Study subjects were female sexual assault victims undergoing examination by a SANE.

SANE reports for 317 subjects met the inclusion criteria and were reviewed. Twelve (4%) victims experienced physical injury requiring medical intervention. A total of 34 (11%) sustained anogenital injuries requiring medical intervention. Overall, 253 (81%) victims did not actively resist at some point during the assault, with 178 (57%) victims never actively resisting. Nearly half (129; 43%) did not appear in the emergency department for 12 or more hours from the time of the assault.

It can be concluded from this study that female victims reporting a sexual assault seek emergency department assistance after the sexual assault in a variable amount of time, rarely suffer moderate or severe physical or anogenital injury, and commonly do not resist their attacker throughout the assault.

This study helps refute three rape myths which previously may have contributed to further victimizing the victim.

Rape Myth, Delayed Reporting, Injuries