



### What is a forensic nurse?

A forensic nurse is a registered nurse or advanced practice registered nurse who completes additional education and training to provide comprehensive care to patients impacted by crime, violence, and traumatic injury. These specialized nurses may also be referred to Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners (SANEs), however, their scope of practice and responsibilities likely expand well beyond the care of patients impacted by sexual violence. Forensic nurses are trained to consult on matters related to:

- sexual assault, domestic and family violence
- physical assault
- child maltreatment
- strangulation
- traumatic injuries
- work related injuries
- animal bites
- motor vehicle crashes
- drug and alcohol related illness/injury
- medical psychiatric emergencies
- elder and vulnerable adult concerns
- associate for cause matters
- mass violence
- drug and alcohol blood draws for law enforcement
- suspect examinations

While a forensic nurse's priority is providing medical care and treatment, they must also understand the medical and legal implications of the care being provided, and may be called to testify in a courtroom as a fact or expert witness. Forensic nurses are trained in principles of fact and witness testimony and this can save medical doctors valuable time away from the hospital and spent in a courtroom. In addition to medical forensic examinations and evidence collection, forensic nurses are trained to:

- obtain photo documentation
- assist with completing victim reimbursement applications
- provide information to patients and families about the criminal justice process and victim rights
- make referrals to other victim services
- conduct lethality screenings and danger assessments
- safety planning
- crisis intervention
- human trafficking assessments

- make referrals to legal, medical, faith-based and address confidentiality programs
- support patients and family members during law enforcement interviews
- collaborate with medical social services and victim advocates
- anticipate and work on discharge planning needs and medical follow up

During a medical forensic examination, the forensic nurse utilizes principles of trauma-informed, patient centered care, allowing the patient to have a voice in the care that they receive. The forensic nurse will explain their role to the patient and provide information about the examination process. The patient can consent to as much, or as little of the examination as they are comfortable with. The nurse will obtain a history of the event, as well as a medical history, and use this information to guide the patient's examination and offer them suitable options in care and treatment. Forensic nurses will conduct a comprehensive head to toe assessment and review of body systems, escalating any acute medical concerns to physician partners for further evaluation. Forensic nurses will also address a patient's bio-psycho-social needs, always being mindful of acute and long-term consequences of trauma, and enlisting any and all resources to help the patient heal. Frequently this includes victim advocates, social workers, referrals to counselors and post-assault crisis resources and safety planning.

### **Where do you find forensic nurses?**

While most forensic nurses work in emergency departments, they may also be found in clinic settings, on college campuses, and working in child advocacy centers. These nurses may be staffed 24/7 in the emergency department or elsewhere in the hospital. Some hospitals are starting to train nurses from units outside of the emergency department, including observation, pediatrics, medical-surgical, psychiatric, intensive care, labor and delivery, and surgery, to work toward 24/7 onsite access to a nurse with this specialized training. This allows for patients to be seen within moments of arrival at the emergency department. Upon triage, the forensically trained nurse will assume primary care of these patients, which will eliminate some of the frustration and re-telling of the victim's story to multiple individuals. Additionally, having the forensic nurse involved with these patients from the onset, ensures proper procedures are followed regarding protocols related to strangulation assessment, lethality screenings, evidence collection and more. The nurse collaborates with all additional indicated partners including doctors, law enforcement, social services, and victim advocates. With this model, staff members enjoy a regular or set schedule and the need for outside employment is reduced or eliminated, which can relieve scheduling challenges that are often found with the on-call staffing model.

While many rural hospitals operate on an on-call model, this is not ideal for patient outcomes and long-term staff retention. This model still results in a delay of care but is certainly preferable over transferring the patient or sending them to another facility for care, which will likely result in the patient terminating care altogether. With the on-call model, staff members may also have to return at a later time to finish charting, as forensic medical documentation requires comprehensive records to be reviewed for accuracy, and should not be done in a rush or while the provider is fatigued. These delays may impact the investigative process and wraparound services.

### **Who do they serve?**

Forensic nurses are trained to consult on matters related to sexual assault, domestic and family violence, physical assault, child maltreatment, strangulation, traumatic injuries, work related injuries, animal bites, motor vehicle crashes, drug and alcohol related illness/injury, medical psychiatric emergencies, elder and vulnerable adult concerns, associate for cause matters, mass violence, drug and alcohol blood draws for law enforcement and suspect examinations.

### **What can they do?**

Forensic nursing programs can greatly impact the community by providing a multitude of much needed services to patients. Oftentimes, these tasks fall to emergency department staff and/or medical social services and in many cases, are simply not addressed due to capacity issues or time constraints. In addition to medical forensic examinations and evidence collection, forensic nurses are trained to obtain photo documentation, assist with completing victim reimbursement applications, provide information to patients and families about the criminal justice process and victim rights, make referrals to other victim services, conduct lethality screenings and danger assessments, safety planning, crisis intervention, human trafficking assessments, make referrals to legal, medical, faith-based and address confidentiality programs, support patients and family members during law enforcement interviews, collaborate with medical social services and victim advocates and anticipate and work on discharge planning needs and medical follow up.

### **How do they protect the hospital and community?**

The development and implementation of a medical forensic program ensures that the hospital is on the cutting edge of providing competent and holistic care to patients. Forensic nurses also protect the hospital from liability by ensuring that the hospital meets the needs of patients with medical forensic conditions, including evidence collection, ensuring evidence integrity, and chain of custody. Physicians and emergency department staff may unknowingly compromise the patient's treatment and the evidence collection process through the course of their examination and care. The forensic nurse's involvement can address the patient's forensic needs at the same time other staff members tend to the patient's medical needs. A collaborative approach to these patients safeguards the best possible medical and legal outcomes for the patient. Furthermore, keeping these patients in their community, whenever possible, limits the strain on local resources, including but not limited to law enforcement, Department of Child Services, victim advocates and more.

As the result of a comprehensive medical forensic program, patients will be treated more quickly than by physicians and with fewer interruptions. Transfers and waits of 4-12 hours will no longer be common and patients will be treated by dedicated staff members who are specially trained and have a passion for this work. Victim's care will no longer fall to those who can "fit them in" and may be unfamiliar with the process of medical forensic examinations and the principles of trauma-informed care.

Additionally, patients and the criminal justice system will benefit by better evidence collection. These staff members are thoroughly trained on specimen collection, storage, documentation and maintaining

chain of custody. In cases without a trained forensic nurse, some studies show that almost half of the time, the chain of custody was not maintained. Medical forensic examination programs also lead to improved prosecution of cases by providing better forensics and expert testimony. Forensic nurses are trained in principles of fact and witness testimony and this can save medical doctors valuable time away from the hospital and spent in a courtroom. These programs also have higher conviction rates, which can aid victims in obtaining justice and bringing them closure necessary to their recovery.

### **How has COVID-19 impacted forensic nurses?**

As a result of the pandemic, individuals impacted by interpersonal violence have been less likely to seek medical care and treatment. Early in the pandemic, many individuals reported being fearful of entering the emergency department, regardless of the extent of their illness or injury, for fear of contracting COVID-19. As healthcare resources began to diminish, nurses from all practice areas were being re-allocated to meet the needs of the critical patient loads being seen throughout the healthcare setting. Forensic nurses were forced into other patient care areas, which further exacerbated a shortage of qualified forensic nurses practicing in the workforce. As the health of our country begins to improve, we are hopeful that forensic nurses will quickly return to the frontlines to once again serve patients impacted by crime and trauma. Forensic nurses are an important part of the medical care team, an asset to the criminal justice system and a crucial part of patient-centered care necessary for building resilience needed for holistic healing.