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Review Article

Forensic Nursing: A Review of its Evolution and Scope with Special Reference to India

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Abstract

Background: Forensic nursing is an evolving specialty that bridges healthcare and the justice system by integrating clinical expertise with medico-legal responsibilities. While the specialty has achieved global recognition through structured training programs such as Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE), India is still at a nascent stage in formally adopting forensic nursing. **Objectives:** This review explores the historical evolution of forensic nursing globally, highlights its roles and competencies, critically analyses its status in India, and identifies challenges and opportunities for strengthening the discipline within the national healthcare and judicial systems. **Discussion:** Globally, forensic nursing has developed into a structured profession supported by associations, postgraduate training, and legal empowerment. In India, however, forensic nursing remains under-recognized due to limited legal authority, lack of standardized curricula, insufficient infrastructure, and cultural barriers. Recent initiatives by the National Forensic Sciences University (NFSU) and Indian Nursing Council (INC) indicate progress. Opportunities include adaptation of global SANE models, integration into One Stop Crisis Centres (OSCCs), policy reforms, and generation of India-specific research. **Conclusion:** Forensic nursing has the potential to transform India's medico-legal framework by improving victim-centered care and strengthening judicial outcomes. Standardized training, legal empowerment, infrastructural support, and academic research are essential for its sustainable development.

1. Introduction

'Hanging Nursing has transitioned from a passive role under medical authority to an autonomous profession involving independent decision-making and critical thinking.¹ This evolution has allowed nurses to develop specialized roles, with clear implications for patient outcomes, professional satisfaction, and system

efficiency. The development of advanced nursing roles—ranging from nurse practitioners to nurse educators—has demonstrated a positive impact on healthcare delivery, underscoring the importance of expanding nurses' responsibilities in emerging fields.² To assume such advanced responsibilities, nurses must not only possess clinical expertise but

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also understand medico-legal and ethical frameworks.³ This integration becomes particularly crucial in cases of trauma, violence, and medico-legal incidents, where healthcare professionals interact with both survivors and offenders.⁴

In India, nurses are often the first point of contact for survivors of assault, sexual violence, domestic abuse, and trauma.⁵ This frontline role places them in a privileged position to ensure victim-centered care while also contributing to the preservation, collection, and documentation of medico-legal evidence. However, despite this potential, their contribution has historically remained under-recognized, largely due to systemic, legal, and academic barriers.⁶

Forensic nursing as a specialty was conceptualized to address this gap, combining clinical expertise with medico-legal competencies. The International Association of Forensic Nurses (IAFN) defines forensic nursing as the “application of nursing practice to public or legal proceedings, and the application of forensic healthcare in the scientific investigation of trauma and death related to violence, criminal activity, and liability”.⁷ Globally, forensic nursing is regarded as a critical component of victim-centered healthcare, whereas in India it is still emerging as a defined specialty.⁶

This review provides a comprehensive overview of the historical evolution of forensic nursing, its core roles and competencies, global training models, and its current scope in India. Challenges and opportunities are analysed to highlight the potential of forensic nursing as a transformative specialty within the Indian healthcare and legal systems.

2. Historical Evolution and Global Development

The roots of forensic nursing can be traced to the late 20th century. The most significant milestone was the establishment of Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) programs in the United States during the 1980s.⁸ These programs trained nurses to conduct sexual assault examinations, preserve forensic evidence, and provide expert testimony in courts. The creation of the International Association of Forensic Nurses (IAFN) in 1992 marked another landmark, offering global recognition to the specialty and structured training frameworks.⁷ Since then, forensic nursing has diversified into subspecialties including child abuse nursing, elder abuse nursing, correctional nursing, death investigation nursing, and disaster response nursing.^{1, 2} These developments

demonstrate how the field has matured into a structured discipline integrated into both healthcare and judicial systems.

Internationally, forensic nurses now play critical roles in evidence-based practice, patient advocacy, and policy formulation.³ Their contributions have been linked to improved survivor outcomes, better quality of forensic evidence, and stronger judicial results.^{9, 10}

3. Core Roles and Competencies

Forensic nurses function at the intersection of clinical care and legal responsibility. Their key roles include:

1. Clinical care: Providing acute medical treatment, crisis intervention, and psychological support to survivors and offenders.²
2. Evidence collection: Obtaining DNA swabs, collecting trace evidence, photographing injuries, and maintaining chain of custody.⁸
3. Documentation and testimony: Preparing medico-legal reports and providing expert testimony in courts.⁹
4. Public health contribution: Participation in surveillance of violence, injury prevention programs, and advocacy for vulnerable groups.¹¹
5. Disaster response: Supporting triage, body identification, and mass casualty management.¹²

Core competencies include trauma-informed care, medico-legal literacy, meticulous documentation, cultural sensitivity, and interprofessional collaboration.^{13, 14}

4. Education and Training Models (International)

Training in forensic nursing varies internationally, ranging from short-term certificate programs to full postgraduate degrees. The SANE model in the U.S. remains the most widely replicated, offering structured training in clinical forensic examination, communication skills, medico-legal documentation, and ethical principles.⁸ Programs emphasize simulation-based learning, clinical placements in medico-legal settings, and competency-based assessments.³

Many universities in North America, Europe, and Australia offer MSc and postgraduate diploma programs in forensic nursing. Training models emphasize simulation-based learning, clinical placements in medico-legal settings, and competency-based assessments. These programs highlight the necessity of a multidisciplinary approach, involving collaboration with forensic medicine, law, law enforcement, and psychology.²

5. Forensic Nursing in India

Unlike global counterparts, forensic nursing in India remains underdeveloped.⁶ Medico-legal responsibilities such as sexual assault examinations and autopsies are typically assigned to physicians, especially forensic medicine specialists. Traditionally, medico-legal responsibilities such as conducting sexual assault examinations and autopsies have been assigned to physicians, particularly forensic medicine specialists. Nurses' roles have been largely confined to providing bedside clinical care⁵. Some progressive work done at certain places towards developing this field.

1. Academic progress: A turning point came with the establishment of postgraduate programs at the National Forensic Sciences University (NFSU), which began offering M.Sc. Forensic Nursing and short-term certificate courses.⁴ In addition, the Indian Nursing Council (INC) recently announced the introduction of M.Sc. Nursing in Forensic Nursing as a recognized specialty course (October 2024). This program is designed to equip nurses with a broad understanding of medico-legal concepts, legal procedures, and trauma management, while also enabling them to assist forensic medical experts in assessments.¹⁵

2. Practice settings: Some tertiary hospitals in India have initiated pilot SANE-style programs within One Stop Crisis Centres (OSCCs), but systematic implementation remains absent. The integration of forensic nurses into emergency departments for domestic violence deaths, sexual assault response teams, and medico-legal units is still limited.^{16, 17, 18}

3. Literature base: Indian academic publications on forensic nursing remain sparse. The few existing studies consistently emphasize deficits in training, recognition, and institutional infrastructure. The lack of indigenous research significantly restricts policy advocacy.^{5, 6, 17}

6. Critical Analysis: Challenges and Opportunities in India

Forensic nursing in India is still in its **formative stage**, and its trajectory is shaped by complex systemic, legal, cultural, and academic factors.

Challenges

1. **Absence of standardized curricula:** The lack of uniform training leads to inconsistent skill development and undermines professional recognition.⁴
2. **Limited legal authority:** Nurses are not legally empowered to conduct medico-legal

examinations or testify as expert witnesses, restricting their contribution.^{5, 6}

3. **Resource deficits:** Many hospitals lack forensic kits, private examination rooms, or funding for specialized staff.⁸
4. **Shortage of professionals:** Undefined career pathways and limited institutional recognition discourage nurses from pursuing this specialty.²
5. **Cultural stigma:** Survivors of sexual violence often avoid medico-legal care due to victim-blaming, lack of confidentiality, or social ostracism.^{3, 18}
6. **Limited research base:** Sparse India-specific studies weaken the evidence needed to support policy reforms.⁶

Opportunities

1. **Expansion of academic programs:** NFSU and INC initiatives can standardize education and create a pool of trained professionals.^{4, 15}
2. **Adaptation of global SANE models:** Local adaptation can help India establish evidence-based, survivor-centered care pathways.¹⁰
3. **Integration with OSCCs and health schemes:** Embedding forensic nurses in OSCCs and government initiatives like Ayushman Bharat can improve access to medico-legal care.^{16, 19}
4. **Policy reforms:** Legal endorsement empowering nurses to collect medico-legal evidence can strengthen both healthcare and judicial outcomes.¹⁷
5. **Research opportunities:** Generating India-specific outcome data on evidence quality, survivor care, and trial outcomes will build local credibility.^{9, 20}

7. Discussion

Globally, forensic nursing has evolved into a structured discipline, enriched by specialized education, professional associations, and evidence-based practice guidelines. India, however, is still navigating the early phases of this professional evolution.^{2, 3, 7} In India, however, the field is still emerging.

To bridge the gap, a **tiered training model** could be implemented:

- Basic forensic awareness for all nursing undergraduates.
- Certificate-level training (SANE-equivalent) for nurses in emergency and obstetric settings.
- Postgraduate specialization (M.Sc. Forensic Nursing) for advanced practitioners.^{4, 15}

Legal recognition is equally essential. Empowering forensic nurses to conduct medico-legal examinations, provide testimony, and certify

documentation would reduce physician workload, particularly in rural and resource-limited areas, and accelerate justice delivery.^{5, 6, 17}

Infrastructure investments, such as dedicated forensic examination units, standardized evidence kits, and digital documentation tools, are critical for improving the quality of medico-legal evidence. In parallel, research must be prioritized. Outcome studies evaluating the impact of forensic nurses on survivor satisfaction, quality of evidence, and conviction rates will provide the data necessary for long-term policy reform.^{8, 12} Research must be prioritized to evaluate forensic nurses' impact on survivor care, evidence quality, and conviction rates.^{9,20} Finally, integration into multidisciplinary teams—including law enforcement, forensic medicine, psychology, and social work—will ensure that forensic nursing not only enhances survivor care but also strengthens India's medico-legal system.^{11, 13}

8. Conclusion

Forensic nursing, though globally recognized, is still in its infancy in India. The specialty holds significant promise for bridging healthcare and justice, particularly in addressing gender-based violence and trauma care. Current initiatives such as postgraduate programs at NFSU and the INC's new specialty course mark important progress. However, challenges relating to curricula, legal authority, infrastructure, and social acceptance persist. Advancing forensic nursing in India will require standardized training curricula, legal reforms, infrastructural support, and research evidence. If these steps are pursued, forensic nursing can transform India's medico-legal landscape, delivering both improved patient care and stronger judicial outcomes.

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