

Forensic Nursing in Modern Healthcare: Current Practices and Emerging Challenges – A Narrative Review

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How to cite this article: Patel K, Parmar R, Patel N, Caleb M, Kothari P, Pandey P. Forensic Nursing in Modern Healthcare: Current Practices and Emerging Challenges – A Narrative Review. GFNPSS-IJMR 2026; 7:7:3559-3561

Submitted: 14 July 2026: **Accepted:** 23 July 2026: **Published:** 31 July 2026

Abstract

Background: In order to offer comprehensive care for victims and offenders of violence, abuse, trauma, and other medico-legal conditions, the specialist area of forensic nursing combines nursing science with forensic and legal principles. Forensic nurses have played a crucial role in emergency rooms, sexual assault response teams, prisons, disaster relief, and community healthcare during the last twenty years. Beyond patient treatment, they are involved in documentation, evidence preservation, legal testimony, and interdisciplinary cooperation. Forensic nursing practice is still impacted by issues like poor training, a lack of institutional support, moral quandaries, and resource limitations despite tremendous progress. This narrative review addresses new issues in contemporary forensic nursing while summarizing current approaches.

Keywords: Forensic nursing, Sexual assault, Evidence collection, Medico-legal care, Violence, Emergency nursing

Introduction

In order to provide high-quality patient care while protecting forensic evidence for legal proceedings, forensic nursing is a new specialization that integrates nursing practice with forensic science and the legal system. It is essential for handling victims of trafficking, abuse, assault, neglect, violence, and other medico-legal situations.¹ Accurate assessment and documentation are crucial since nurses working in emergency rooms are often the first medical

professionals to come into contact with patients involved in criminal or suspicious activities.²

The need for qualified forensic nurses has grown globally due to the rising rates of sexual assault, elder abuse, child abuse, domestic abuse, and interpersonal violence.³

Injury evaluation, gathering evidence, upholding the chain of custody, patient advocacy, psychological assistance, and cooperation with law enforcement are some of their duties.⁴ Forensic nursing has grown into disaster response,

correctional healthcare, humanitarian crises, and death inquiry as healthcare systems continue to change.⁵ This review discusses current forensic nursing practices and the challenges influencing the future development of this important nursing specialty.

Current Practices in Forensic Nursing

The use of forensic nurses in emergency rooms is growing, where they offer prompt evaluation and care while making sure that injuries are properly documented and tangible evidence is preserved.⁶ Standardized injury photography, specimen collection, maintenance of chain of custody, and detailed medico-legal documentation improve both patient outcomes and judicial investigations.¹

One of the most well-known positions in forensic nursing is that of Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners (SANEs). They provide medico-legal reports for court procedures, perform thorough forensic examinations, gather biological evidence, administer emergency contraception and preventive therapy, and provide psychological assistance.⁷

Forensic nurses also contribute significantly to the identification and management of domestic violence, child abuse, elder abuse, human trafficking, and neglect. Early recognition of abuse indicators, confidential interviewing, mandatory reporting, and referral to social support services are essential components of their practice.³ Multidisciplinary collaboration among healthcare providers, police, forensic laboratories, psychologists, and legal professionals strengthens comprehensive victim care.⁴

Recent technological advancements have improved forensic nursing practice. Electronic health records, digital photography, teleforensic consultation, DNA analysis, and standardized documentation systems have enhanced evidence preservation and communication among multidisciplinary teams.⁸ These innovations contribute to improved clinical accuracy while reducing documentation errors.

Emerging Challenges

Despite considerable progress, forensic nursing faces several challenges. One of the most significant barriers is the shortage of formally trained forensic nurses in many countries, particularly in low- and

middle-income healthcare settings.² Undergraduate nursing curricula often provide limited exposure to forensic principles, resulting in insufficient knowledge and confidence among practicing nurses.⁶

Ethical and legal dilemmas frequently arise when balancing patient autonomy, confidentiality, mandatory reporting requirements, and legal obligations.⁴ Nurses may experience conflicts between protecting patient rights and complying with judicial procedures, requiring sound ethical decision-making and institutional guidance.

Resource limitations further restrict forensic nursing services. Many healthcare institutions lack dedicated forensic examination rooms, evidence collection kits, photographic equipment, and standardized protocols.⁵ Heavy workloads, inadequate staffing, and insufficient administrative support may compromise both patient care and evidence integrity.

Psychological stress and secondary traumatic stress remain important occupational concerns. Continuous exposure to victims of violence, homicide, abuse, and traumatic injuries may contribute to burnout, compassion fatigue, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion among forensic nurses.⁹ Regular counseling, peer support, resilience training, and continuing professional education are essential for maintaining workforce wellbeing.^{10,11}

Future developments should emphasize specialized education, certification programs, interdisciplinary collaboration, digital forensic technologies, research, policy development, and international practice guidelines to strengthen forensic nursing services globally.^{12,13}

Conclusion

By combining clinical nursing practice with forensic science and legal considerations, forensic nursing has become an essential part of contemporary healthcare. Its increasing significance is demonstrated by its increased involvement in emergency care, violence prevention, evidence preservation, and victim advocacy. Even if multidisciplinary cooperation and technological improvements have improved practice, issues with education, morality, a lack of workers, and scarce resources continue to be major obstacles. Patient care and medico-legal outcomes

will be enhanced by bolstering forensic nursing education, research, and institutional infrastructure.¹⁴

Financial support and sponsorship: Nil

Conflicts of interests: There is no conflict of interest

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