

Forensic nursing

By Sheila Early, RN, BScN

Forensic nursing in Canada is an evolving specialty which is currently usually included under the umbrella of emergency nursing or psychiatric nursing. However, forensic nursing can be part of all nursing, be it intensive care nursing, pediatric nursing, psychiatric nursing, emergency nursing, and so on.

Here are some examples of forensic nursing interventions within a variety of settings, which may help nurses to recognize the broad nature of forensic nursing:

- A five-year-old child is admitted to ER with a broken leg, parent says child

fell from a ladder. X-rays show the fracture is spiral in nature. The orthopedic technician who is called to set up Buck's traction asks the child what happened. Child says, "Daddy did it". This is a potential child abuse case and all documentation regarding this child will be viewed as evidence.

- A 20-year-old female is admitted to ICU unconscious with unknown etiology. An astute intensive care nurse, who also is a sexual assault nurse examiner, realizes the potential loss of forensic evidence and oversees the assessment of the patient and documentation of findings as the patient's condition is critical. Observations made and documented at this time are crucial to what becomes a homicide investigation.
- A code is called in a hospital, a patient has fallen in a stairwell and is critically injured at the bottom of the stairs. A Code Blue ensues which is not successful. The surrounding area is cleaned of blood stains before police arrive. Crucial evidence is lost.
- A new, single mother on maternity does not want to look at her newborn child. She eventually tells her primary nurse this child is the result of a sexual assault she did not report to police.
 - A patient is admitted to the OR for a gunshot wound to the abdomen. When he awakes, the removed bullet is in a container at his

bedside as a souvenir. The bullet is no longer admissible as evidence in the police investigation.

- A medication incident occurs in which a patient receives a lethal dose of analgesic because of a faulty intravenous pump. The primary nurse does not secure the pump in a way that it cannot be tampered with. Crucial evidence is lost.
- The coroner's office is investigating an MVA with a fatality. The investigator is a forensic nurse death investigator who is a former emergency nurse.

Forensic nursing courses are appearing in secondary colleges in Canada in some provinces.

Opportunities for online forensic nursing/health courses in both US and Canada are expanding.

Sexual assault nurse examiner programs are now available in five provinces: British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario and Nova Scotia.

Forensic psychiatric units are present in several provinces as well. Nurses work as death investigators in several provinces.

Legal nurse consultants review charts and evaluate standards of nursing care in civil matters.

The future of forensic nursing is endless and, as nurses are evaluating their current roles in health care, this is one more opportunity for nurses to move forward and grow within the scope of nursing practice. One word of warning: Forensic nursing is contagious! It will lead you down paths you never knew existed. 

