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FORENSIC NURSING

A Fascinating Aspect of Patient Care

By: Thomas Collins, RN, ADN, BA, MA

The world of forensic nursing is both fascinating and mysterious. Forensic nurses often do not make headline news, yet they often provide support for victims of major crimes, particularly sexual assault. They also may be called to collect evidence from suspects in sexual assault cases. Through advanced training, forensic nurses use forensic science techniques similar to those you might see on popular TV shows like “CSI” or “NCIS.” The evidence is then evaluated by a crime laboratory in an effort to confirm that a crime was in fact committed, and to detect DNA or other information to determine who the suspect is. But this is just one aspect of the work that forensic nurses perform. Depending on the jurisdiction, forensic nurses work as field investigators for the County Coroner or Medical Examiner; provide medical support for individuals recently arrested or serving time in prison; or observe and provide therapy for individuals found mentally incompetent to stand trial or to serve prison time for major crimes.

In some cases, nurses with prior experience in forensic science, or that simply have an interest in forensic science look for opportunities outside of their career position to provide a service to the community. That was my situation after graduating from nursing school in 2001, and starting my career as a Critical Care Nurse with UCSD. Before I entered nursing school, I

earned several degrees related to forensic science, and was fortunate enough to get an internship with a major crime lab here in San Diego County. So, while my job as a staff nurse in the I.C.U. was rewarding, I missed working on crime scenes. Unfortunately, there are very few paid full-time positions for forensic nurses across the country, and San Diego County is no exception.

One hospital here in the county has a contract with the state prison system to provide a medical ward for prisoners with medical issues that cannot be handled on prison grounds. The nurses on that unit are considered “forensic nurses” to differentiate them from other nurses at the hospital that do not work with the prisoners. The care provided on the prison ward includes support for chronic conditions such as heart failure, cardiac dysrhythmias,

kidney failure, H.I.V., hepatitis, diabetes, etc. In other words, the same chronic medical conditions that many nurses at UCSD work with on a regular basis. While the support the prison ward nurses provide is important, it was not the same as working a crime scene, or with a crime victim.

The Sexual Assault Response Team (S.A.R.T.) that has a contract with the San Diego Police Department had several part-time positions available, so I started the training process with them, including the mandatory 40 hour introduction to SART nursing. Topics covered in the class include the definition of various sex crimes under state law, the law enforcement response to a report of sexual assault, and how S.A.R.T. is “activated” when a sexual assault report is “confirmed,” the volunteer



Photograph of the hands of a victim of Domestic Violence, a standard part of forensic documentation. In this case, the lack of visible injury would refute the suspect's claim of her throwing the first punch.



Thomas Collins, RN, ADN, BA, MA has been a UCSD Staff Nurse since January 2002. He started out in the Thornton ICU where he spent 2.5 years, then he transferred to the Cardiac Cath Lab where worked for another for 2 years. In 2006 Thomas joined the staff of the EP lab.

- Volunteer Forensic Nurse, San Diego Family Justice Center, 2005-2010
- Certificate in Forensic Nursing, University of California, Riverside Extension program, 2014
- Instructor, Forensic Nursing Certificate program, U.C. Riverside Extension since 2015

program that provides advocates that sit with the patient during the S.A.R.T. exam to provide emotional support, and how the crime labs process the physical evidence in an attempt to isolate DNA to identify the attacker. Under California state law, the law enforcement agency that is investigating the sexual assault is required to pay the fee for the exam. In the City of San Diego for the last calendar year, that total is about 580 exams. As with most law enforcement agencies in the state, the San Diego Police Department uses money from a state-wide crime victim assistance program funded by the financial penalties that the courts assess when an individual pleads guilty or is found guilty of a violent crime.

After taking call with experienced

S.A.R.T. nurses, and performing S.A.R.T. exams with a preceptor, I found that the on-call requirement was a heavy burden to add to my full-time work schedule with UCSD. And there was no way to tell when we would be called in. The nurses are paid a set fee per forensic exam. They get a stipend for taking call, but nowhere near the fee per exam. On several shifts, we were not called at all. So I left the S.A.R.T. program, but still wanted to be involved with forensic nursing in some way. Soon after, I heard about an office run by the City of San Diego, the Family Justice Center. This office was created to consolidate services to victims of domestic violence in one location, in an effort to help them get away from the abuse. As a volunteer forensic nurse, my role was to interview clients with physical injuries from abuse, and use my forensic training to document those injuries. The San Diego Police Department has several teams of detectives that specialize in certain crimes, including robbery, homicide, domestic violence, and auto theft. The detectives that work domestic violence cases are based in the Family Justice Center, making it easier for victims of abuse to come in for services. Once the detectives became familiar with my expertise in injury documentation, many of them asked the victims to make a point of coming in “for photos” on my volunteer day.

The volunteer work at the Family Justice Center was very rewarding to me - I could help a victim of violence to understand what was happening from a medical perspective, and provide support to law enforcement at the same time. Of course, when documenting injuries on a victim of crime, if the case goes to court, the medical evidence also goes to court. After my initial testimony in a felony trial as a Witness of Fact, my expertise in documentation of

injuries was recognized by the court, and I was considered an Expert Witness in the remaining cases that were brought to trial.

Through this volunteer work, I was asked to create a power point presentation on recognition of injuries from abuse. I still give versions of that presentation, usually to local non-profit organizations that provide support services to victims of Domestic Violence, which is also known as Intimate Partner Violence. These organizations are required to hold “40-hour training” to new employees and new volunteers at least once a year (similar to the 40-hour training I had to attend to work with the S.A.R.T. system). After my 5 years of volunteer service in the Family Justice Center, the City of San Diego shifted and consolidated the organization of several departments in response to budget cuts, and I had to move on to other projects. My affiliation with the local non-profits continues, and I give the presentation on injuries from abuse at least 5 times a year now. The “Aha” moments that viewers get when I explain how injuries are inflicted, and what to look for are still fun for me, while providing critical information about this serious issue that affects every segment of society, from the poor to the rich, from the uneducated to those with advanced degrees.

In an effort to boost my academic credentials in forensic nursing, I completed the online Certificate in Forensic Nursing through the University of California at Riverside. This program is open to any Registered Nurse with an interest in forensic nursing. When I finished the Certificate program, I received the ultimate compliment - one of my instructors, looking at a medical retirement, asked me to take over one of her classes. So I am now an instructor in that program!