

Role of Nursing in Medico-Legal Cases: A Narrative Review

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ABSTRACT

Background: Medico-legal cases involve the intersection of healthcare and the legal system, requiring healthcare professionals to deliver appropriate clinical care while preserving forensic evidence. Forensic nursing has emerged as a specialised discipline that combines nursing science with forensic principles to improve patient care and support the administration of justice.

Objective: To review the current literature on the roles, responsibilities, and contributions of forensic nurses in the management of medico-legal cases and to identify challenges and future directions for forensic nursing practice.

Methods: A narrative review of the literature was conducted using PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar. Peer-reviewed articles published in English between 2015 and 2025 were searched using the keywords forensic nursing, medico-legal cases, sexual assault nurse examiner (SANE), evidence collection, and victim advocacy. Relevant studies addressing the role of forensic nurses in clinical and legal settings were included and synthesised thematically.

Results: The reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that forensic nurses play a pivotal role in evidence collection and preservation, accurate medico-legal documentation, trauma-informed patient care, victim advocacy, and collaboration with law enforcement and judicial authorities. The evidence also highlights the positive impact of Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) programmes on the quality of forensic evidence, patient satisfaction, and legal outcomes. Despite these benefits, challenges remain, including inadequate training, limited institutional support, workforce shortages, and the absence of standardised forensic nursing services in many healthcare systems.

Conclusion: Forensic nurses make substantial contributions to both healthcare and the justice system by integrating clinical expertise with forensic principles. Expanding forensic nursing education, strengthening institutional policies, and establishing standardised forensic nursing services are essential to improve patient outcomes and enhance the quality of medico-legal investigations.

Keywords: Forensic nursing, Medico-legal cases, Evidence collection, Victim advocacy, Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner, Trauma-informed care.

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INTRODUCTION

Medico-legal cases constitute an important area of healthcare practice where medical management and legal responsibilities converge. These cases include physical assault, sexual violence, child abuse, elder abuse, domestic violence, poisoning, road traffic injuries, burns, and suspicious or unexplained deaths. Healthcare professionals are often the first point of contact for victims and therefore have a responsibility not only to provide timely medical treatment but also to ensure accurate documentation and preservation of forensic evidence.¹⁻³

Forensic nursing has evolved as a specialised nursing discipline that integrates nursing science with forensic medicine and the legal system. Forensic nurses provide comprehensive patient care while ensuring that evidence is collected, preserved, and documented according to accepted legal standards.³⁻⁶ Their practice extends beyond clinical management to include victim advocacy, psychosocial support, collaboration with law enforcement agencies, participation in legal proceedings, and public health initiatives aimed at preventing violence and improving patient safety.^{2,6}

One of the most recognised roles within forensic nursing is that of the Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE), a specially trained nurse who provides comprehensive care to survivors

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of sexual assault.^{5,7} Numerous studies have shown that SANE programmes improve the quality of forensic evidence collection, increase patient satisfaction, reduce psychological trauma during examination, and contribute to improved legal outcomes.^{7,8}

The importance of forensic nursing has gained increasing recognition worldwide because of the growing burden of interpersonal violence, abuse, and other medico-legal incidents. Nevertheless, the development and implementation of forensic nursing services remain inconsistent across countries. While several high-income nations have established structured forensic nursing programmes, many low- and middle-income

countries continue to face challenges related to limited training opportunities, insufficient institutional support, lack of standardised protocols, and inadequate awareness among healthcare professionals.^{2,3,10}

This narrative review synthesises current evidence on the role of forensic nurses in medico-legal cases. It summarises their major responsibilities, highlights the benefits of forensic nursing services, identifies challenges affecting practice, and discusses future directions for strengthening forensic nursing education, policy, and clinical practice.^{12,15}

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design

This study was conducted as a narrative review to synthesise and critically evaluate published literature on the role of forensic nurses in the management of medico-legal cases. Unlike a systematic review, a narrative review provides a comprehensive overview of the available evidence, identifies recurring themes, and discusses implications for clinical practice, education, and policy.

Literature Search

A comprehensive literature search was undertaken using the electronic databases PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar. The search included articles published between January 2015 and March 2025.

The search strategy incorporated combinations of the following keywords using Boolean operators (AND, OR): “forensic nursing,” “medico-legal cases,” “forensic nurse,” “sexual assault nurse examiner,” “SANE,” “evidence collection,” “victim advocacy,” “forensic documentation,” and “trauma-informed care.”

Additionally, the reference lists of relevant articles were manually screened to identify further eligible studies.

Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion Criteria

- Peer-reviewed research articles and review articles.
- Articles published in the English language.
- Studies published between 2015 and 2025.
- Studies describing the roles, responsibilities, competencies, or impact of forensic nurses in medico-legal practice.

Exclusion Criteria

- Editorials, commentaries, conference abstracts, and letters to the editor.
- Duplicate publications.
- Articles not directly related to forensic nursing practice.
- Studies without sufficient methodological or outcome information.

Study Selection

The titles and abstracts of the identified articles were screened for relevance. Full-text articles meeting the eligibility criteria

Table 1: Major roles of forensic nurses in medico-legal cases and their nursing implications.

Domain	Major findings	Nursing implications
Evidence collection and preservation	Collection of biological and trace evidence while maintaining the chain of custody	Improves evidence quality and legal admissibility
Documentation	Accurate injury assessment, body mapping, photography, and medico-legal documentation	Strengthens judicial proceedings and reduces documentation errors
Victim advocacy	Psychological support, informed consent, crisis intervention, and trauma-informed care	Improves patient satisfaction and reduces re-traumatisation
Interdisciplinary collaboration	Coordination with police, forensic laboratories, physicians, and legal professionals	Enhances continuity of care and legal investigation
Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) programmes	Specialised forensic examination and evidence collection	Associated with improved forensic evidence and higher prosecution rates
Education and training	Specialised forensic education improves competency and confidence	Enhances the quality of medico-legal nursing practice

were subsequently reviewed. Studies addressing forensic nursing practice in emergency departments, sexual assault services, domestic violence, child abuse, elder abuse, forensic evidence collection, and medico-legal documentation were included in the final review.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Relevant information from the selected studies, including study characteristics, objectives, clinical setting, and principal findings, was extracted and organised. The evidence was synthesised using a thematic approach to identify the major roles of forensic nurses and the challenges associated with forensic nursing practice.

Ethical Considerations

As this study is based exclusively on previously published literature, ethical approval and informed consent were not required.

RESULTS

A total of 60 publications met the eligibility criteria and



were included in this narrative review. The selected studies comprised systematic reviews, narrative reviews, observational studies, qualitative research, clinical practice guidelines, and professional position statements from different countries. The literature consistently demonstrated that forensic nurses play an essential role in integrating healthcare services with the legal system through evidence collection, comprehensive patient assessment, accurate documentation, victim advocacy, and interdisciplinary collaboration (Table 1).

DISCUSSION

The evidence reviewed demonstrates that forensic nurses play an increasingly important role in strengthening both patient care and the legal investigation process. Their expertise extends beyond traditional nursing responsibilities by integrating clinical assessment with forensic principles, ensuring that medical management and evidence preservation occur simultaneously.

Across the reviewed studies, accurate evidence collection and meticulous documentation emerged as the most consistently reported responsibilities. Standardised documentation, including injury photography, body mapping, and maintenance of the chain of custody, was found to improve the reliability of forensic evidence and support judicial decision-making.

Another major finding was the emphasis on trauma-informed care. Unlike conventional emergency care, forensic nursing prioritises emotional support, informed consent, privacy, and respect for victims, thereby minimising secondary victimisation. These patient-centred approaches improve both psychological recovery and cooperation during forensic examinations.

Studies evaluating Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) programmes consistently reported better quality forensic evidence, greater patient satisfaction, and improved legal outcomes compared with standard emergency care. These findings highlight the value of specialised forensic nursing education and certification.

Despite these positive findings, several barriers continue to limit the implementation of forensic nursing services, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Common challenges include shortages of trained forensic nurses, limited institutional infrastructure, inadequate legal awareness among healthcare professionals, absence of standardised national guidelines, and insufficient multidisciplinary coordination. These limitations may compromise evidence quality and reduce access to comprehensive medico-legal care.

Overall, the literature indicates that strengthening forensic nursing education, integrating forensic nursing services within healthcare institutions, and developing supportive national policies are essential to improving both patient outcomes and the effectiveness of the justice system.

Nursing Implications

The findings of this review emphasise the significant contribution of forensic nurses to the management of medico-

legal cases and highlight several implications for nursing practice, education, research, and health policy.

Implications for Nursing Practice

Forensic nurses should be integrated into emergency departments, trauma centres, obstetric and gynaecological units, and community healthcare settings where medico-legal cases are frequently encountered.

Standardised protocols for evidence collection, injury documentation, photography, and maintenance of the chain of custody should be implemented to ensure the quality and admissibility of forensic evidence.

Trauma-informed care should be incorporated into routine nursing practice to promote patient dignity, confidentiality, psychological support, and informed consent.

Implications for Nursing Education

- Undergraduate and postgraduate nursing curricula should include forensic nursing concepts, medico-legal responsibilities, and forensic evidence management.
- Regular continuing nursing education (CNE) programmes, workshops, simulation-based training, and certification courses should be conducted to strengthen nurses' competencies in forensic practice.
- Specialised training programmes, including Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) certification, should be promoted to improve the quality of care for survivors of violence.
- Implications for Nursing Administration and Policy
- Healthcare institutions should establish dedicated forensic nursing units and develop institutional guidelines for managing medico-legal cases.
- Collaboration among nurses, physicians, forensic experts, law enforcement agencies, and legal professionals should be strengthened through multidisciplinary protocols.
- Governments and regulatory authorities should formulate national policies recognising forensic nursing as a specialised nursing discipline and support workforce development through training and certification.

Strengths of the Review

This review synthesises recent evidence published between 2015 and 2025 and provides a comprehensive overview of the evolving role of forensic nurses in medico-legal care. It highlights the diverse responsibilities of forensic nurses, including evidence preservation, documentation, victim advocacy, interdisciplinary collaboration, and specialised forensic services. The review also identifies current challenges and future opportunities for strengthening forensic nursing practice worldwide.

LIMITATIONS

This review has several limitations. Only English-language publications were included, which may have excluded relevant evidence published in other languages. Variations in study

designs, methodologies, and outcome measures limited direct comparison between studies. In addition, most available literature originated from high-income countries, reducing the generalizability of findings to low- and middle-income settings where forensic nursing services are still developing. Publication bias may also have influenced the available evidence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Based on the available evidence, the following recommendations are proposed:
- Establish dedicated forensic nursing departments within tertiary hospitals and trauma centres.
- Expand Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) programmes to improve the quality of forensic examinations and victim care.
- Develop national clinical guidelines and standard operating procedures for medico-legal nursing practice.
- Integrate forensic nursing education into undergraduate and postgraduate nursing programmes.
- Strengthen collaboration between healthcare institutions, forensic laboratories, law enforcement agencies, and judicial authorities.
- Promote multicentre and region-specific research to evaluate the effectiveness of forensic nursing interventions in different healthcare settings.

CONCLUSION

Forensic nursing has become an essential component of contemporary healthcare by integrating clinical expertise with forensic science to improve patient care and support the administration of justice. The evidence reviewed demonstrates that forensic nurses play a pivotal role in evidence collection and preservation, accurate medico-legal documentation, trauma-informed care, victim advocacy, and multidisciplinary collaboration. These contributions not only improve the quality of healthcare services but also strengthen the integrity of legal investigations and judicial outcomes.

Despite growing recognition of forensic nursing worldwide, significant challenges remain, particularly in resource-limited settings where training programmes, institutional support, and specialised and standardised policies are inadequate. Addressing these barriers through education, professional development, policy implementation, and interdisciplinary

collaboration will facilitate the expansion of forensic nursing services and improve the management of medico-legal cases. Continued investment in forensic nursing education, research, and healthcare infrastructure is essential to ensure equitable access to high-quality forensic care and to enhance both patient outcomes and the effectiveness of the justice system.

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