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**Towards Holistic Care: Applying Forensic Nursing Science and Practice
Before, During, and After Disasters**

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Abstract

Introduction

Forensic nursing science is defined as a body of diverse and collective knowledge drawn from the application of the forensic sciences to the nursing process in public or legal proceedings. The forensic aspects of healthcare include the physiological, psychological, and behavioral sciences relevant to the scientific investigation of mass casualty events and related medicolegal issues. The introduction of a forensic clinician in nursing was imperative for addressing the legal issues in healthcare.

Forensic nurse examiners (FNE) are ideally suited for disaster scenarios. They are a vital resource to the multidisciplinary investigation of disaster-related trauma and death. All disasters which involve human casualties must be managed as a medicolegal event. Life-saving medical care to minimize injury and death is always the first concern. Legal issues are a secondary, but vital concern for the survivors. There may be both civil and criminal implications associated with disaster investigations. For example, issues may involve the identification of an individual or industry liable for the disaster, and determining the extent of fiscal responsibility related to medical care, rehabilitation or death benefits.

Before

Disaster scenes present a complex situation requiring the services of a team of experts who not only have the proper training and equipment, but who also have the authority and skills to accomplish the necessary mission at hand. In the United States most jurisdictions use a multidisciplinary approach, utilizing both healthcare and justice personnel on the investigation team. Coordination of mission tasks and cooperation of all team members are essential for ensuring a successful outcome.

Disaster prevention and intervention during the 3 stages of disaster care include the need for forensic education, training, and experience before, during, and after the event. Specialized knowledge is required to accurately document injury and to recover, preserve, and secure medical/forensic evidence. The integration of forensic science and nursing practice requires educational preparation within academic institutions which emphasizes the unique knowledge and skills that are vital for the

investigation of liability-related trauma. This responsibility directly relates to the North American Nursing Diagnosis Association (NANDA) recommendation for legal and ethical care in the investigation of non-fatal and fatal trauma.

“The structure of the entire nursing process is predicated on maintaining a certain state of mind – an investigative, interpretive, dogmatic search for the facts and the truth (NANDA, 1990).” This concept is applied to the specific processes involved in the clinical investigation of trauma or death of the forensic patient.

Competency-based education is essential for preparing nurses to function in mass casualty incidents. It provides a body of disaster-related science, and equips them with a working knowledge of policies and procedures associated with mass casualty incidents. The American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC) has developed the first certification designed to verify disaster-related professional competencies. This certification validates professional role development, mastery of specific skills, and attests to core competencies essential for disaster-related job performance. Successful completion of the certification process assures employers and the public that healthcare disaster professionals have mastered an interprofessional body of knowledge and that they possess essential skills related to all phases of the disaster cycle. Certification will support the mission and vision of the hospital in healthcare disaster management.

During

The forensic nurse examiner (FNE) provides 1) direct nursing care to victims of crime related-trauma and/or the accused , 2) consultation services to nursing, medical, and law-related agencies 3) expert court testimony in areas dealing with investigative processes and adequacy of services delivery and 4) nursing diagnoses of specific conditions. As a public service profession, nursing has a responsibility to maintain standards of practice in cases where health care intersects with the law. Due to the vast number of legal issues involved in the investigation of trauma or death associated with disasters, the need for forensic specialists in nursing has been firmly established.

Any human-created or natural event of such severity and magnitude to warrant disaster systems (US Congress Office of Technology Assessment, 1993) requires a multitude of health and justice professionals including forensic nurse examiners along with forensic pathologists, forensic odontologists, death scene investigators, fire fighters, paramedical personnel, and law enforcement officers. Members of a disaster response team should be trained in the forensic techniques of evidence and body recovery.

During a disaster response, initial efforts involve resuscitation and stabilization of casualties. This requires first responders, clinical forensic nurses, emergency/trauma physicians and others who are

skilled in life and limb-saving interventions. During this critical time as victims are being prepared for transfer to a hospital or other healthcare facility, forensic nursing skills are essential to recognize, document, recover, and secure critical evidence.

Physical evidence recovery is collected with the assistance of the forensic nurse in the emergency department or during the autopsy in the morgue. Wound debris is a primary resource for physical and non-physical evidence. Fragments of wire, metal, glass, and clothing within body tissue, or blood samples obtained during treatment may provide evidence of an explosive device, poison, chemical or noxious gas, as well as biological agents related to terrorism or arson.

The various human and physical dynamics which may identify the causes of the disaster can help to determine the basis for criminal intent and decisions associated with payments for medical care and survivor benefits. Forensic nurse examiners (FNE) and forensic nurse death investigators (FNDI) should be educated in the fundamentals of human identification and forensic odontology in death investigation related to disaster victims. The FNE and FNDI at the disaster scene or at the medical examiner's facility, field morgue, or command center can assist in decedent identification, documentation of personal effects, recovery, security and preservation of medical/forensic evidence and photo-documentation. Forensic nurses are skilled in the process of providing highly sensitive information to the grieving and bereaved next of kin and are excellent choices for delivering death notifications.

Red Cross personnel responding to the scene along with local, state, national, and members of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and/or the Red Crescent Society can appreciate the experience and training of the forensic nurse in disaster forensic management. Disaster specialists are assigned responsibilities in a variety of areas including overseeing the recovery of personal effects and the recovery and removal of bodies. The careful preservation of evidence during these procedures is essential to accurate personal identification and the determination of cause and manner of death. Death notification is also among other tasks requiring medical/forensic supervision or skills.

After

Forensic nursing science is exemplified in the application of clinical and scientific nursing knowledge to questions of law related to the civil and criminal investigation of disasters. This includes determining liability for traumatic injury, unknown or suspicious causes of death, and evaluation of the patient's emotional trauma. Competent forensic holistic care encompasses body, mind, spirit, and the law. The holistic investigation of fatal and non-fatal trauma presents unique challenges beyond the immediate disaster treatment environment, extending to the many subsequent humanitarian needs associated with the catastrophe.

The multicultural population of the United States and the increasing number of immigrants and refugees requires cultural competence in the aftermath of catastrophic trauma and death. As a member of a holistic discipline, the forensic nurse clinician recognizes the relevance of cultural

diversity and the application of psychosocial and transcultural nursing skills. The forensic patient may be a disaster survivor or victim of human rights violations in their country of origin. They may express a fragile fear at the sensitive assessment and examination or photo-documentation of bodily injuries. The forensic nurse death investigator must also be prepared to experience the emotional reactions of family members when making notification of death. Competent forensic nursing skills are demonstrated by respecting the forensic patient and their family's spiritual beliefs, as well as court-related issues surrounding patient care.

Conclusion

The development of a new field of practice is a challenging experience that brings together professionals who recognize a mutual benefit through collaborative practice, exchange of knowledge, and shared successes in order to reach common goals. This presentation will discuss the role and responsibilities of the forensic nurse at the disaster scene, in the clinical treatment environment, and their relationship with the various specialties in the forensic sciences.

We must remain concerned with improving the healthcare of at-risk populations and to advance the information technologies that are revolutionizing forensic nursing research, clinical care, and forensic education. We must foster a partnership with scientists, police, and other legal agencies in eliminating global threats through antiviolence strategies. Being forensically competent in nursing isn't an option, it is an obligation.