

Forensic Nursing

What is Forensic Nursing?

Forensic nursing, one of the newest specialty areas recognized by the American Nurses Association (ANA), is gaining momentum nationally and internationally. Forensic nursing practice is, according to the International Association of Forensic Nurses (IAFN), the "application of nursing science to public or legal proceedings." Forensic nurses investigate real and potential causes of morbidity and mortality in a variety of settings.

Responsibilities range from collecting evidence from perpetrators and survivors of violent crime to testifying in court as a fact witness (someone who saw a situation firsthand) or an expert witness (someone who offers an opinion of a particular situation). Forensic nurses understand evidence collection, such as forensic photography, for subsequent legal and civil proceedings and are the "bridge between the criminal justice system and the health care system." Skills of the forensic nurse include but are not limited to: observation, documentation, and preservation of evidence, all critical in determining the legal outcome of violent crimes. The largest subspecialty of forensic nursing is sexual assault, closely followed by death investigation, forensic psychiatric nursing and medical-legal consulting.

What is the Importance of Forensic Nursing?

Borrowing on their training and experience in observation as a part of their caregiving role, the forensic nurse has the unique position of being a qualified medical professional trained to observe, recognize, collect and appropriately document evidence that ultimately becomes foundational to establishing the legal causation and responsibility for traumatic injury.

How Do I Decipher the Maze of Forensic Sexual Assault Examiner Acronyms?

Programs designed to instruct medical personnel with the fundamentals of the forensic examination of a victim of sexual assault were first offered in 1976, and typically consisted of forty hours of academic instruction followed by specified hours of hands-on clinical practice. Subsequently, these pilot programs became structured to provide both physicians and licensed nurses with instruction on the comprehensive care of, and forensic evidence collection from, sexual assault victims. This led to the professional recognition of those completing such courses as SAFE, Sexual Assault Forensic Examiner, SANE, Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner, FNE, Forensic Nurse Examiner, SANC, Sexual Assault Nurse Clinician, and currently SAE, Sexual Assault Examiner. Other than their acronyms, the courses offered by each are essentially similar.

Where Do I Obtain a Forensic Nursing Education?

Borrowing on their training and experience in observation as a part of their caregiving role, the forensic nurse has the unique position of being a qualified medical professional trained to observe, recognize, collect and appropriately document evidence that ultimately becomes foundational to establishing the legal causation and responsibility for traumatic injury. Forensic nursing curriculums focus on victimology, perpetrator theory, forensic mental health, interpersonal violence, criminology, and criminal justice. Apart from practical experience under the auspices of a trained forensic doctor or nurse, there are generally four recognized methods of acquiring forensic nurse training:

- Certification Programs offered by a university that provide course programs in forensic nursing apart from those structured courses of study leading to a undergraduate or graduate degree.
- Continuing Education courses that are required for renewal of State nursing licensure and are focused on forensic subjects. These courses are frequently offered as part of the Certification Program courses described in above.

- School of Nursing undergraduate, or graduate, elective courses in forensic nursing, which, again, are frequently offered as part of the Certification Program courses described in above.
- Formal graduate study programs leading to a Master's of Science-Nursing degree, which curriculum, in addition to core graduate nursing courses, include special instruction in the areas of evidence collection, forensic law and science and provide for a clinical internship in associated settings such as a forensic crime laboratory, medical examiner's office, shelter for victims of sexual and domestic violence, forensic psychiatry unit or a hospital.

What is SANE-A Certification?

The International Association of Forensic Nurses (IAFN) has developed a national written certification examination for the sexual assault nurse examiner. To become certified as a SANE-A, you must be a registered nurse (RN) for two years or more and meet all of the eligibility requirements. You must also pass the certification written examination developed by the IAFN Forensic Nursing Certification Board and the Center for Nursing Education and Testing (iafn.org).

What is IAFN?

In 1992, seventy-two SAFEs/SANEs from the U.S. and Canada gathered together in Minneapolis and formed the International Association of Forensic Nurses. This organization is a nonprofit international professional organization of registered nurses whose goal is to develop, promote and disseminate information about the science of forensic nursing both nationally and internationally.

What are the Specialty Roles in Forensic Nursing?

Educating and informing potential employers regarding the profession of forensic nursing and the valuable skills provided by qualified forensic nurses. Meeting and establishing professional relationships with other forensic professionals, including crime scene technicians, medical examiners and attorneys is called "networking". Through networking you will establish a professional identity within the forensic community which will ultimately help. Always join as many professional forensic organizations as you can. The International Association of Forensic Nurses will keep you informed of professional developments in the field of forensic sciences. As their responsibilities evolve, forensic nurses are assuming increasingly diverse roles, in risk management, employee litigation, forensic nurse investigator, forensic clinical nurse specialist, forensic nurse educator, bioterrorism, domestic and international investigations of human rights abuse, psychiatric forensic nursing, forensic geriatric nursing, correctional nursing, emergency room forensic nursing, pediatric forensic nursing, sexual assault and domestic violence. Newly proposed is the child abuse nurse examiner. The most common roles are sexual assault nurse examiner (SANE), advanced practice forensic nurse or forensic clinical nurse specialist, nurse death investigator and nurse coroner.

What are Some Additional Settings for Forensic Practice?

- **Tissue and Organ Donation:** In large trauma facilities, the skills of an experienced, knowledgeable forensic nurse are a significant contribution to the crisis intervention team working with families of potential donors. The nurse needs to know the specifics regarding the "legal framework of organ donation, familiarity with brain death criteria, and confident skills in required consent request... The nurse must meet the legal requirements and at the same time provide emotional support to the grieving family. (Lynch, 1995)
- **Pediatrics:** Forensic nurses may specialize in the recognition, evaluation, treatment and support of young victims of abuse through various facilities and organizations. Child abuse and neglect cases can be handled by forensic nurses depending on the protocols for that facility. Each facility will have

protocols which specify who may examine and counsel pediatric victims. In some cases, SAFE nurses may not have authority to work with these patients.

- **Corrections:** Correctional nurses have a great deal of autonomy, provide acute and chronic assessments, dispense medications, manage acute illness and injuries, perform health screenings, and educate inmates on various health related topics. Correctional facilities also reflect the society at large; therefore the incarcerated population is aging and has a wide range of health issues that need to be addressed while serving their sentence. Some facilities are privately owned and hence hire their own healthcare staff or contract with healthcare companies to supply staffing needs. There are institutions of all sizes and for many different populations and age groups.
- **Psychiatric:** There are but a few states in the nation that have the Psychiatric Forensic Nursing Classification. Employment is usually through the state civil service system, associated with the Department of Public Welfare. Nurses working in this role are responsible for psychiatric evaluation and treatment of criminal offenders by order of the court system. The offenders are typically admitted to a state facility for a brief period of evaluation and then returned to the county jails for sentencing. This specialty is closely tied to correctional nursing, violence issues with children at all age levels. School nurses are accessible and trusted healthcare professionals who can work with students on skills such as conflict resolution, stress management, suicide/injury prevention, and relationship management.
- **School Settings:** In the educational environment, school nurses are in a position to observe, assess, educate and intervene when necessary.

Academic Programs

[Xavier University](#)

[University of Cleveland State](#)

Professional Organizations

American Academy of Forensic Sciences (aafs.org)

American Institute Forensic Education (taife.com)

References

American Forensic Nurses (<https://www.goafn.org/>)

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