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Role of Forensic Nurses in the mortuary and postmortem examination

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Abstract

Forensic nursing science is a developing at a fast pace in the developed countries of the world and the forensic nurses have gained valuable roles in the different departments. Mortuary services are often in a state of neglect in the developing countries especially the postmortem examination. Mainly this is due to lack of assistance to forensic physicians by educated and trained professionals. Forensic nurses can do a variety of roles to improve the functioning of the mortuaries. Role of forensic nurses in the postmortem examination and upkeep of the mortuaries is essential and it is emphasized that forensic nurses can play a very pivotal role in the functioning of the mortuaries.

Keywords: Forensic Nurse; mortuary; morgue; postmortem examination; autopsy nurse.

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Introduction

Mortuary or morgue is a place in the hospital which may be a room or building where dead bodies are kept and examined before the dead bodies are sent for funeral which may be cremation or burial. It is also known as funeral parlor where dead person is prepared for final rites and where it is kept for viewing by the friends and relatives (1).

According to International Association of Forensic Nurses, Forensic Nursing is the practice of nursing where there is inter-sectioning of the health and legal system (2).

Forensic nursing Science is a branch of science which is a combination of knowledge and practice of nursing health care, criminal judicial system and Forensic Sciences including Forensic Medicine; when applied to criminal investigation and judicial system of a country (3).

Autopsy which is also known as necropsy and postmortem examination is the examination of the body after death to determine the cause of death or observe various changes which are produced by the disease (4) and is carried out in specially designated areas of the hospital.

An autopsy that covers the objectives which are medico-legal is known as forensic autopsy and usually all sudden and unnatural deaths are examined (5). It involves external examination and dissection of the body and taking of the samples of biological fluids and tissues when needed. It is conducted by the Professionals who are authorized to conduct it. Usually this is done by the medical examiners, forensic physicians and forensic pathologists. In many countries including India autopsies are conducted by general physicians too, as there is severe shortage of forensic pathologists throughout the world. The criminal investigation of deaths may be done by the Medical Examiner, Coroners, Police authorities, Magistrates or Procurator Fiscal in different countries and then medico-legal autopsy may be requested or ordered by them.

The main aims of conducting the postmortem examination is to identify the body, determine the cause of death, find out the postmortem interval and find out the kind of weapon used (6).

In this process of conducting autopsies, they are assisted by autopsy technicians but the availability of these technicians is meager. In these situations they are assisted by non technical persons and at many places they are assisted by sweepers who do not have knowledge about the procedures and ethics of the autopsy.

Here it is visualized that if forensic nurses are available in the mortuaries to assist all those who are involved in postmortem examination, postmortem services will get a face lift in many countries including India.

Autopsy nurses can work in the mortuaries with the medical examiners as well as they can work with the coroners where ever the system of Coroner Investigation is still prevalent (7) (8). In India where the coroner

system or medical examiner system is not prevalent they can work with the forensic physicians, or medical officers conducting the postmortem examination (9) (10).

The aim of writing this paper is to remove the ambiguities and clearly define the role of the forensic nurse in the postmortem examination in the mortuaries. Role of the forensic nurses may vary in different countries depending upon the laws of those countries and criminal procedures of the different countries. Forensic nurses can do a variety of duties in the hospitals and morgues (7).

They can receive the dead body in a more emphatic manner with least hurt to the relatives and the accompanying persons. It is a grave situation most of the times as it is the son or mother or father or siblings or friends are laying dead in front of their eyes. They can take care of the emotional needs of the relatives and friends who feel traumatized by the violent deaths of the victims.

Forensic nurses can receive all the documents including request letter and papers concerned to the investigation. They can also receive files and papers of the treatment in case the person was admitted in the hospital.

Forensic nurses can make the desired entries in the concerned registers of the Morgue to document all the requirements in a correct manner.

They can learn to do the dissection of the dead body and they will prove to be great assets to the forensic physicians whenever there is increased load of work. They should know I, Y and modified Y incisions given to dissect the body and the rationale behind them (6).

They should know all the four different techniques of dissection i.e. the technique of Letulle where all the organs of neck, thorax and abdomen are removed in one block; the technique of Virchow where all the organs of the body are removed one by one; the technique of Rokitansky when organs are dissected in situ and the Technique of Ghon where en bloc dissection is done individually for the Urogenital system, organs of abdomen and organs of neck and thorax (11).

Forensic nurses can help in collection of the biological evidences especially the blood and tissue samples (7). They can also preserve the clothes of the case (12) as often these are the valuable pieces of evidences in the form of blood stains, seminal stains and tears, cuts or holes. In case of firearm injuries presence of soot or burns is also important in addition to the holes made by the firearm bullets and pellets.

In cases of poisoning or suspected poisoning Forensic nurses can help in proper preservation of the viscera, packing, sealing and labeling of the packs containing the viscera (13). Usually preservation is done in saturated solution of the common salt and in some instances it is preserved in absolute alcohol.

Viscera may also be needed to be preserved in case there is a doubt of some disease e.g. myocardial infarction or tuberculosis. Here the preservative is usually 10% formalin solution.

Whenever samples for DNA profiling are needed they can collect the samples properly so that there is no contamination of the samples. Usually it is the blood stain made on a piece of cloth and dried or it can be done on FTA card. If other tissues are to be preserved, it can be done in a right manner depending upon the tissue to be preserved.

In the mortuaries forensic nurses can do the photography of the injuries (7) and can learn to do the videography wherever required especially in custodial deaths and dowry death cases.

If the body is disfigured forensic nurses can help in the reconstruction or reconstitution of the body especially face. This will be a great solace to the relatives and friends to see the body in a presentable form.

Forensic nurses can properly dress the body after postmortem examination as per the customs and requirements of the family and the community. To look it better they can do little make up of the face (3). Forensic nurses can handover the body in a dignified manner as per the requirements of the society and the law of the country. This is most important step in dealing with the death in a dignified way.

To maintain a proper chain of evidence they can handover the body, postmortem reports and all the samples and belongings to the police under proper receipt.

Forensic nurses can take care of proper storage of the dead bodies in the mortuaries when ever required and observing the body temperature before putting in the cold rooms or cold chambers. Maintenance of right temperature of the cold chambers and cold rooms is very important to avoid decomposition in the dead bodies.

Forensic nurses can take care of the dissection instruments and their proper cleaning and proper sterilization to avoid injuries and infections.

Forensic nurses can take care of disinfection of the mortuaries. Forensic nurses can take care of the procedures which can spread infection and they can prevent the spread of infection amongst the workers in the mortuaries.

Forensic nurses can help in the proper disposal of the biological waste during and after the postmortem examination by segregating the waste in the proper containers.

Forensic nurses can play a very good role in mass disaster situations as they are previously exposed to violent deaths. They are usually very useful in situations of community crisis and aftermath of mass disasters. Here they can help in identification of the dead bodies (2).

Forensic nurses will be better equipped to deal with violent situations in a compassionate manner and help the judicial system by properly collecting the evidences during postmortem examination (8).

Material and Methods

Google search and Google scholar is used in this study to find out the data using the keywords forensic nurse, autopsy nurse, crime scene investigation and mortuary.

Discussion

Utilities of the forensic nurses in the mortuaries have been well established (14). Level of awareness about forensic nursing varies in different countries around the world. Level of the trained forensic nurses is quite different in the countries around the world and availability of trained nurses is also differing a lot around the world.

Forensic nurses can be one of the conduits between medicine and law by doing the various duties in the morgues for which they can also appear in the court as expert witness and explain the works done by them and face the cross question too thus helping the judicial system in a better way than the prevalent routine in most of the countries where the helpers are illiterate or minimal literate many times and are not competent to appear in the courts for the work done by them.

Forensic nurses can find a job with the medical examiners and forensic pathologists where they can help the investigative and judicial system.

Forensic nursing jobs may become one of fastest growing jobs as other nursing jobs (8) and there is a vast potential of jobs for forensic nurses in the autopsy rooms.

Conclusion

Forensic nurses can play a very supportive and useful role in the mortuaries or autopsy centers. In many developing countries it is observed that there are no trained autopsy technicians or nurses to help to carry out the postmortem work. Due to lack of this expert help medical officers have to depend upon uneducated, untrained help which is usually in the forms of sweepers. Here it is visualized that forensic nurses who knows a lot about human body can be very useful in the autopsy rooms.

The role of forensic nurses has been well established in different fields including the role of death investigator and autopsy nurse. Different useful roles can be played by the forensic nurses from the receipt of the dead body in the mortuary to the disposal of the dead body from the mortuary.

Acceptance of forensic nurses in the mortuaries will also depend upon the awareness about forensic nursing by different stakeholders in different countries and the intentions and desires of the forensic pathologists and general physicians doing the postmortem work and administrators of the mortuaries. It will also depend upon to provide right level of education and training to the forensic nurses and willingness to use their services to improve the work in the mortuaries.

Conflict of Interest

None

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