

Emergence of Forensic Nursing in India: A Catalyst for Change in Indian Healthcare System

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Abstract

Introduction: Forensic nursing, an emerging field, provides essential care to victims of trauma, abuse, and sudden deaths. Despite its significance, forensic nursing is relatively new in India. The inclusion of forensic nursing in the nursing curriculum by the Indian Nursing Council marks a progressive step toward integrating legal and healthcare systems, benefiting public health.

Methodology: This article employs literature reviews, and expert opinions to explore the evolution of forensic nursing and suggest strategies to strengthen forensic nursing in India.

Results: The analysis highlights the growing importance of forensic nursing in revitalizing the medico-legal system and meeting the healthcare needs of victims. Integration of forensic nursing fosters collaboration between healthcare and legal professionals, enhancing patient care and justice delivery.

Conclusion: Forensic nursing offers promise for improving healthcare outcomes and promoting justice in India. Continued efforts to expand training programs, raise public awareness, and advocate for policy reforms are crucial for realizing the full potential of forensic nursing in India.

Keywords: Forensic nursing, Nursing in India, forensic nurse examiner, Indian nursing council, Forensic nursing in India.

Introduction

Forensic nursing, a distinctive and evolving field, emerges at the intersection of the longstanding

profession of nursing and the pervasive nature of crime in society. Nursing, a discipline with a rich historical legacy dating back centuries, has continually adapted to meet the evolving needs of

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communities. From traditional bedside care to the multifaceted role of healthcare advocacy, nurses have played a vital part in promoting patient's well-being and recovery.¹ Forensic nursing builds upon this legacy, actively engaging with the legal aspects of healthcare and bringing a specialized skill set to aid those affected by trauma, violence, and criminal acts.

In today's world where crime remains an unfortunate reality, forensic nursing serves as a crucial pillar of support, offering a distinctive combination of healthcare expertise and legal insight. Crime impacts all segments of society, transcending social and economic boundaries. In this context, forensic nursing plays a pivotal role in addressing the aftermath of criminal incidents. Beyond the conventional roles, forensic nurses contribute by providing compassionate care and meticulously collecting and preserving evidences that are pivotal in legal investigations.²

According to studies, unique fusion of nursing and forensic expertise positions forensic nursing as a comprehensive response to the complex challenges presented by crime. By intertwining the compassionate care inherent in nursing with meticulous attention to legal detail, forensic nursing serves as a bridge between the healthcare and legal systems. Through its application, forensic nursing stands ready to make useful contributions to both individual well-being and the pursuit of justice in communities.³

Evolution of forensic nursing globally

Formal acknowledgement of forensic nursing as a sub-speciality dates back to the early 1980s. Ann Wolbert Burgess stands out as a trailblazer among forensic nurse researchers, dedicating her work to exploring issues surrounding sexual assault and interpersonal violence. A significant contribution attributed to Burgess is the conceptualization and development of the notion of rape trauma syndrome, particularly concerning victims of sexual assault.^{4,5} Another influential figure in this field is Virginia Lynch, who played a pivotal role in its development. The roots of forensic nursing also trace back to Alberta, Canada, with the introduction of the forensic nurse death investigator role. Pioneered by Virginia Lynch, this discipline, officially recognized in 1991. The International Association of Forensic Nurses (IAFN), established in 1992, defines forensic nursing as a global practice intersecting healthcare and legal systems.⁶ In the past 15 years, forensic nursing has gained international adoption, influencing countries such as South Africa, Japan, Hong Kong, and Sweden.⁷ With time, education and practice of forensic nursing gained attention globally, with programs active in

the US, Canada, Europe, Asia, Africa, and more. Forensic nurses, especially Forensic Nurse Examiners (FNE) play a critical role in addressing challenges like HIV/AIDS, crimes against humanity, and human trafficking in countries like United States.⁵ They extend services from mass disaster management to supporting the US military in forensic medical services.⁸

Historical development of forensic nursing in India

The field of forensic nursing in India has evolved steadily. It is driven by various factors such as advancements in healthcare, legal reforms, progress in forensic science, and changing societal views on crime and victim care.⁹ It began gaining traction after Virginia Lynch's visit to India in 2002. By 2003, forensic nursing was promoted at national events such as seminars and conferences, gaining interest across the country. It was formally introduced into the nursing curriculum in 2020. Support from international scholars and growing awareness helped solidify its presence, making a model for forensic nursing development in India.¹⁰

Current state of education and career path for aspiring forensic nurses:

As forensic nursing is a developing field in India, only a few institutes currently offering formal education in this area. However, as awareness grows, many institutions have started introducing specialized programs to train nurses in forensics. Nurses who wish to pursue a career in forensic nursing can enroll in graduate nursing programs approved by the Indian Nursing Council (INC).¹¹ Forensic nursing has already been included as a mandatory subject in the four-year B.Sc. nursing program under the INC curriculum. For further specialization, nursing students can pursue a postgraduate degree in forensic nursing from universities like National Forensic Sciences University (NFSU), Gandhinagar, Gujrat.¹² Certification courses related to forensic sciences is also offered by certain organizations such as International Association of Forensic Nurses (IAFN), providing opportunities for nurses to gain exposure to forensic aspects within their programs.¹³ Additionally nurses who wish to study and work in abroad, can pursue online as well as offline courses in forensic nursing from various renowned institutions like Binghamton university, University of Colorado, Johns Hopkins University, St. Petersburg university, University of California etc.¹⁴

Upon completing the required education, forensic nursing offers a wide range of career opportunities on a global scale. As this field continues to grow and evolve, forensic nurses have numerous opportunities

for career advancement and specialization, allowing them to make meaningful contributions to both healthcare and legal systems. They can pursue various specialized roles, each designed to address specific aspects of patient care and legal processes. Some common career paths include¹⁵:

- **Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE):** These professionals deliver holistic care to survivors of sexual assault, performing forensic medical evaluations and collecting crucial evidence for legal proceedings. A retrospective study conducted by Hollender M et al. (2023) reported that patient who received care from a SANE were more often offered recommended services and resources and victims more frequently accepted them as compared to non-SANE encounters.¹⁶
- **Forensic Nurse Death Investigator:** In this role, nurses collaborate with medical examiners to determine the cause and circumstances surrounding deaths that are suspicious or unexplained. According to Baumann R et al. (2015), forensic nurses use holistic approach to death investigation with a focus of care that includes not only the decedent but the surviving loved ones as they assist families through initial stages of grief in the investigation of death.¹⁷
- **Forensic Psychiatric Nurse (FPN):** These nurses work in settings such as correctional facilities, forensic hospitals, and mental health centers, providing care to offenders and individuals with mental health disorders involved in the legal system. A study done by Ewalds-Kvist B et al. on 52 nurses reports that FPNs are more competent in issues about violence and conflict to provide security and quality care.¹⁸
- **Correctional Nursing Specialist:** These nurses deliver medical care, including assessments, diagnoses, and treatment, to individuals in prisons, detention centers, or transitional housing facilities. A study by Barbosa et al.¹⁹ reports that prison nursing plays a decisive and comprehensive role that matches the care provided in other healthcare sectors.¹⁹
- **Legal Nurse Consultant:** Acting as intermediaries, these professionals support attorneys, physicians, and their clients in legal cases. They often work with insurance companies, healthcare organizations, or forensic agencies to provide expert insights.
- **Forensic Gerontology Specialist:** This specialization addresses the legal and human

rights issues affecting older adults, focusing on their unique healthcare and advocacy needs.

Scope of Forensic Nursing in Indian Healthcare System

In India, the scope of forensic nursing is evolving, spurred by advocacy from global bodies like the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Association of Forensic Nurses (IAFN) to integrate forensic content into nursing education.⁵ While many prestigious institutions offer B.Sc. (Nursing) courses with limited forensic units, there is a growing recognition of forensic nursing's importance in bridging gaps between the criminal justice and healthcare systems. This integration aims to elevate standards of care for crime victims, the wrongly accused, and those unjustly convicted.²⁰ The types of forensic nursing practices in India vary based on the intervention point in the forensic process and practice settings, including hospitals, communities, courts, or police stations. However, it's crucial to delineate that the term "forensic" should be reserved for nurses actively involved in client assessment or evaluation with justice-related implications. Working in correctional, institutional, or hospital settings alone does not confer forensic nursing status unless direct contributions to justice pursuits are evident.²¹

Need and major areas where forensic nursing is useful in Indian healthcare system:

As crime rates continue to rise, there is an increasing demand for forensic nursing services, driven by growing awareness of legal rights, legislative reforms, and public consciousness regarding violence and victimization.²² Reflecting on crime statistics and evolving needs, following below are the primary areas where forensic nursing can be actively practised:

1. **Crimes against women:** The National Crime Records Bureau's (NCRB) annual report indicates a substantial increase in crimes against women in India. In 2022, a staggering 4,45,256 cases were recorded. The crime rate against women was reported at 66.4 per lakh population, with a charge-sheeting rate of 75.8. Reports reveals that the majority of crimes against women consisted of cruelty by husband or relatives (31.4%), followed by kidnapping and abduction (19.2%), assault with intent to outrage modesty (18.7%), and rape (7.1%).²³

Role of Forensic Nurses: Given that nursing is a predominantly female profession, victims often feel more comfortable and open with female forensic

nurses. This can be particularly beneficial in sensitive situations, helping to create a supportive environment for the victim.

2. **Crime against minors:** NCRB-2022 report reveals a troubling increase in crimes against minors, with 1,62,449 recorded cases, marking an 8.7% rise from the 1,49,404 cases reported in 2021. Kidnapping and abduction constituted the largest category, accounting for 45.7% of the cases. Additionally, 39.7% of the cases were reported under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offenses Act (POCSO). Also, 1,020 cases were registered under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act.^{24,25}

Role of Forensic Nurses: Forensic nurses are often in a unique position to build trust with victims, who may feel more comfortable and open with them. Forensic nurses are trained to recognize signs of various forms of abuse, including physical, sexual, and psychological, allowing them to intervene early and connect victims with necessary legal and social resources. Their role is integral to both the immediate care and long-term protection of minors, significantly contributing to the efforts to curb and prevent these heinous crimes.²⁵

3. **Elder Abuse:** Elder abuse is a significant and escalating concern in India, reflecting societal changes and the vulnerabilities of the ageing population. According to the HelpAge India Report (2020), nearly one in six elders experience abuse, with disrespect (47%), verbal abuse (29%), neglect (22%), and physical violence (10%) being the most common forms. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 2017 report indicates that about 23% of the elderly in India have experienced abuse, with higher incidences reported among women and those in urban areas.²⁶

Role of Forensic Nurses: Specialized training of forensic nurses enables them to recognize various forms of elder abuse and collaborate with multidisciplinary teams to ensure care and protection for the elderly.²⁷

4. **Human Trafficking:** According to the NCRB report, in 2022, a total of 2,250 cases of human trafficking were registered in India, with 6,036 victims identified. Among these victims, 2,878 were children, including 1,059 girls.²³

Role of Forensic Nurses in Human Trafficking: Forensic nurses are trained to recognize signs of trafficking such as physical injuries, psychological

trauma, and subtle behavioural indicators—these nurses are key in uncovering cases that might otherwise go unnoticed. **Substance Abuse and Drug-Related Crimes:** The NCRB recorded approximately 80,000 cases under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act in 2022.²³

Role of Forensic Nurses: Forensic nurses provide medical care to substance abuse victims and gather evidence in drug-related cases.

Implications of Forensic Nursing in India

Forensic nursing, while not widely implemented in Indian hospitals currently, holds immense potential. Introducing forensic nursing practices could lead to following outcomes:

1. **Improved Victim Care:** Forensic nurses would provide comprehensive care to victims of violence, abuse, and trauma, addressing both medical and psychological needs for better recovery outcomes. Trained to identify and manage injuries from violence and abuse, forensic nurses' specialized knowledge ensures thorough documentation crucial for health and legal purposes in India, where such crimes often go unreported or insufficiently addressed.
2. **Enhanced Legal Outcome:** Forensic nurses meticulously document injuries and collect evidence, crucial for legal cases. Their detailed records and expert testimony can significantly influence the fairness and accuracy of judicial proceedings.
3. **Violence Prevention, Public Education and Advocacy:** Forensic nurses play a pivotal role in recognizing and addressing patterns of abuse and violence. Through community education, forensic nurses raise awareness about abuse signs and reporting importance, fostering proactive measures against violence and abuse.²⁸
4. **Mental Health Promotion:** Victims of violence often endure psychological trauma. Forensic nurses offer essential mental health support, aiding victims in coping with emotional aftermath in India, where mental health services are underutilized and stigmatized.
5. **Strengthening Healthcare Systems through training and multidisciplinary approach:** Establishing forensic nursing programs enhances healthcare workforce, strengthen professionals and thereby elevates overall care standards across health care institutions. Also, it promotes collaboration among healthcare providers, social workers, law

enforcement, and legal professionals, ensuring coordinated victim support tailored to India's diverse healthcare landscape.

6. *Policy development:* Evidence and data from forensic nursing research can reform India's policies on violence prevention and victim support, guiding more effective strategies and interventions.

Challenges for Forensic Nursing

In the dynamic realm of forensic nursing, characterized by constant evolution and global advancements, India faces a unique blend of challenges and opportunities. Limited awareness, inadequate training, and a lack of standardized protocols are some of the challenges. Currently, dedicated forensic nursing professionals are scarce in prominent institutes of national importance such as All India Institutes of Medical Sciences, where nurses often assist in medico-legal cases but lack formal recognition in this role.²² The introduction of specialised designations for forensic nurses would significantly improve the management of medico-legal cases, leading to more efficient justice delivery and enhancing professionalism within healthcare and forensic medicine.²⁹ Therefore, recommendations and suggestions shall be directed from Indian Nursing Council and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Advocating for the creation as well as acceptance of forensic nurses could enhance awareness and emphasize the positive prospects of this field, encouraging nursing students to consider it as a rewarding career choice.

Fostering Evidence-Based Forensic Nursing in India: Key Strategies and Initiatives

Building a culture of evidence-based practices (EBP) in forensic nursing is essential for ensuring high-quality care, advancing professional standards, and contributing to the improvement of forensic services.^{30,31} Below are strategies to foster such a culture in countries like India:

1. *Establishing Designated Posts:* Assign specific roles and responsibilities to designated forensic nursing positions within healthcare institutions. This ensures that professionals with specialized knowledge and training lead forensic nursing efforts, emphasizing the importance of their contributions.
2. *Defining a Code of Ethics for Forensic Nurses:* Develop a comprehensive Code of Ethics specific to forensic nursing. This code should outline the ethical principles, values, and standards that guide the practice of forensic nurses, fostering a shared commitment

to integrity, professionalism, and patient-centred care.

3. *Clear Job Descriptions for Forensic Nurses:* Define clear and detailed job descriptions for forensic nurses, outlining their responsibilities, expectations, and scope of practice. This clarity ensures that forensic nurses understand their role and can effectively contribute to evidence-based practices.
4. *Developing Forensic Nursing Protocols:* Establish standardized protocols for forensic nursing practices. These protocols should cover aspects such as evidence collection, documentation, victim support, and collaboration with legal agencies. Standardization ensures consistency and adherence to best practices in forensic nursing.
5. *Encouraging Collaborative Practice for Knowledge Exchange:* Foster a culture of collaboration among forensic nurses, legal professionals, law enforcement, and other healthcare providers. Encourage regular interdisciplinary meetings, case discussions, and knowledge exchange sessions to enhance collaboration and shared success in evidence-based practices.
6. *Encouraging Nursing Process Application in Forensic Services:* Promote the application of the nursing process in forensic services, incorporating EBP principles at each stage:
 - Assessment: Identify forensic situations and potential victims systematically.
 - Planning: Approach investigations with a structured plan based on best practices.
 - Intervention: Document situations, collect evidence, conduct interviews, provide appropriate care, and report to legal agencies, adhering to evidence-based guidelines.
 - Evaluation: Conduct post-intervention reviews to assess the effectiveness of forensic nursing practices and identify areas for improvement.

Mastering Forensic Nursing: Core Concepts and Practices from McCracken for future forensic nurses:

The ABCs of Forensic Nursing, outlined by McCracken (2001), offer essential core concepts and practices for professionals, guiding them in evidence gathering, victim support, legal

aspects, and interdisciplinary cooperation, thereby ensuring top-tier care and justice delivery by nurses. McCracken emphasizes the importance of precision, empathy, and professionalism, providing forensic nurses with the necessary knowledge and competencies to navigate the intricacies of their

practice effectively. From evaluating crime scenes to providing expert testimony, the ABCs of Forensic Nursing furnish a framework for delivering top-tier care and contributing to the pursuit of justice across various forensic contexts.³² (Refer to Figure 1).

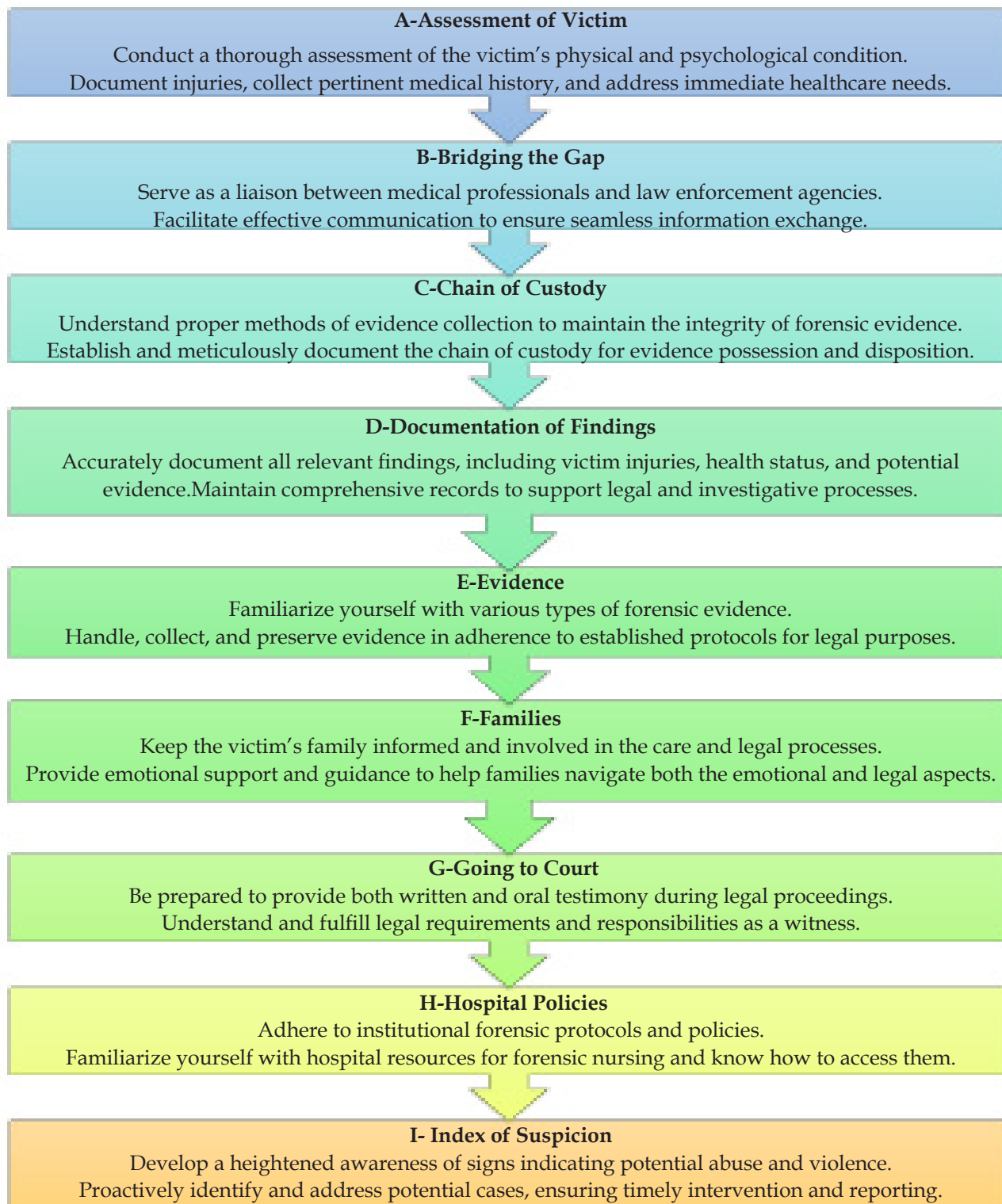


Figure 1: ABCs of Forensic Nursing

Building a Successful Career in Forensic Nursing:

To build a successful career in forensic nursing, following steps can be taken:

1. **Practical Exposure:** Work in emergency departments, trauma centers, or mental health units to understand the interplay between healthcare and legal needs. Also, volunteering with NGOs or organizations supporting victims of violence can provide valuable insights into victim advocacy.
2. **Networking and Memberships:** Join professional bodies like the Indian Society of Forensic Medicine or the International Association of Forensic Nurses (IAFN) to stay updated on developments and opportunities.
3. **Continuous Learning:** Attend conferences, webinars, and workshops focused on forensic science, criminal justice, and advanced nursing practices. Develop skills in documentation, courtroom testimony, and forensic evidence handling.
4. **Government and NGO Opportunities:** Government agencies like the National Commission for Women (NCW) and various state-run healthcare programs often require professionals with forensic expertise.³³ Also Collaborate with NGOs focusing on gender-based violence and child abuse, where forensic nurses play a vital role.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the implementation of a comprehensive and multidisciplinary education and training program for nurses in forensic nursing emerges as a vital resource to reduce the backlog of cases for forensic physicians. The inherent capabilities of nurses in possessing fundamental information, skills, and attitudes can significantly enhance forensic investigations and patient care within the forensic sciences domain. However, amidst the broad scope of forensic nursing, challenges such as feasibility, ethical considerations, and potential role conflicts with other forensic professionals require focused attention. Policymakers must take a central role in addressing these issues by clearly defining job

descriptions and providing guidelines, ensuring a seamless integration of forensic nursing. By doing so, the collaboration between nurses and other forensic professionals can be optimized, leading to more efficient, ethical, and impactful forensic practices.

Research Highlights:

1. What is the current knowledge?

Forensic nursing is a well-established field in many foreign countries, where nurses work in collaboration with law enforcement and healthcare systems to provide care for victims of violence, trauma, and crime, as well as to collect evidence. However, in India, forensic nursing is a relatively new concept, with limited literature and research available on the subject.

2. What is new here?

- This article highlights the potential of forensic nursing in India.
- It outlines the scope of forensic nursing within the Indian healthcare system.
- Focuses on key areas where forensic nursing can be applied.
- Discusses the challenges and opportunities of forensic nursing in the Indian context.
- Explains key strategies and initiatives for fostering evidence-based forensic nursing practices in India.

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