

Bridging the Gap: The Need for Forensic Nursing Officers in Sri Lanka's Medico-Legal Framework; Perception of Judicial Medical Officers in Western Province, Sri Lanka

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Background: Forensic nursing plays a vital role in bridging the gap between healthcare and the judicial system. Many countries have successfully integrated Forensic Nursing Officers (FNOs) into their medico-legal frameworks; however, Sri Lanka lacks a structured Forensic Nursing role. The absence of FNOs poses significant challenges for Judicial Medical Officers (JMOs) and other stakeholders involved in medico-legal investigations.

Objectives: To explore the necessity of integrating FNOs into Sri Lanka's medico-legal framework from the perspective of JMOs, and to examine their expected roles, the challenges arising in their absence, and potential pathways for integration.

Methods: An exploratory descriptive qualitative design was employed. Twelve in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with Consultant Judicial Medical Officers (CJMOs) from the Western Province, using purposive sampling. Data saturation was achieved by the 10th interview. Thematic analysis was used to identify key patterns. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Review Committee, Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo.

Results: Three main themes emerged. First, JMOs highlighted the need for FNOs, citing excessive workloads, delays in documentation, and lack of adequate victim support due to the absence of specialized nursing input. Second, under expected roles, FNOs were seen as crucial for injury documentation, evidence preservation, victim communication, and follow-up care—serving as a bridge between healthcare and legal systems. Third, barriers to integration included systemic resistance, unclear role definitions, and limited training opportunities. Participants stressed the need for policy reforms, targeted training, and stakeholder involvement to support effective implementation.

Conclusions: This study highlights the challenges faced by JMOs due to the absence of FNOs and underscores the need for a well-defined role within the system. Key recommendations include the development of structured forensic nursing education, policy reforms, and international benchmarking to align with global best practices. Implementing these measures will enhance the quality of medico-legal services, improve victim care, and contribute to a more efficient and multidisciplinary forensic healthcare system in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: forensic nursing officers, judicial medical officers, need, medico-legal framework, Sri Lanka

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