

Reflections of the Forensic Nursing Field on Patient and Society Safety

Derya Şahin

¹ Sinop University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Sociology Department, Sinop,Türkiye

Abstract

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Forensic nursing represents a worldview that seeks to bring together the concepts of health and justice, the two most powerful systems that affect the lives of people in crime and violence around the world. Its studies area includes not only medical interventions but also ethical, legal, and sociocultural practices in violence, neglect, and crime-related cases. Patient safety and its impact on public health are not only related to clinical success, but also to how the practices integrate with society. The negative effects of stigmatization, epidemics, and medical malpractice on patient safety and public health can be felt in many areas, such as perception of injustice or legitimization, corporate ethics, and rights. In this study, the effects of forensic nursing on patient and community safety and health will be examined. The research found that studies focusing on forensic nursing, community safety, and patient safety are very few and not conducted together. It is believed that this review will be created permanently for both individual and general judicial official practices that are important at the social level.

Keywords: Forensic nursing, patient, safety, community health

Özet

Adli hemşirelik alanının hasta ve toplum güvenliğine yansımaları

Amaç: Adli hemşirelik, dünya çapında suç ve şiddete maruz kalan insanların hayatlarını etkileyen en güçlü iki sistem olan sağlık ve adalet kavramlarını bir araya getirmeyi amaçlayan bir dünya görüşünü temsil eder. Çalışma alanı yalnızca tıbbi müdahaleleri değil, aynı zamanda şiddet, ihmal ve suçla ilgili vakalarda etik, yasal ve sosyokültürel uygulamaları da içerir. Hasta güvenliği ve halk sağlığı üzerindeki etkisi yalnızca klinik başarıyla değil, aynı zamanda uygulamaların toplumla nasıl bütünleştiğiyle de ilgilidir. Damgalanmanın, salgın hastalıkların ve tıbbi uygulama hatalarının hasta güvenliği ve halk sağlığı üzerindeki olumsuz etkileri, adaletsizlik veya meşrulaştırma algısı, kurumsal etik ve haklar gibi birçok alanda hissedilebilir. Bu çalışmada, adli hemşireliğin hasta ve toplum güvenliği ve sağlığı üzerindeki etkileri incelenecektir. Bu derlemenin toplumsal düzeyde önem arzeden konularda hem bireysel hem de genel olarak adli hemşirelik uygulamalarına yönelik farkındalık yaratacağı düşünülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Adli hemşirelik, hasta, güvenlik, toplum güvenliği

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Corresponding Author: Derya Şahin, Sinop University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Sociology Department, Sinop,Türkiye.

Email: deryasahin@sinop.edu.tr **ORCID ID:** 0000-0003-3640-021X0

INTRODUCTION

Forensic nursing science represents a worldview that seeks to bring together the two most powerful systems that affect the lives of people around the world in crime and violence: health and justice. Lynch (1) defined it as combining the forensic aspects of health care with the comprehensive education of registered nurses in the areas of bio/psycho/social/spiritual aspects.

Effective forensic case management, unfortunately, does not have adequate policy and legislation for both perpetrators and victims. Therefore, the forensic nursing profession is critical for the elimination of unfair victimization or accusations, especially global care standards (1). Their unique contributions increase coordination and cooperation, share medical/forensic expertise, enrich forensic services while improving the care of victims of crime, and take part in certain areas of responsibility between health institutions and law enforcement (2). Given the increasing social risks prevalent in communities and the defined roles (in internationally recognized countries) and responsibilities of forensic nurses, it is our main goal to figure out how to effectively leverage the expertise of forensic nurses, raise awareness of what we can apply in our working environments in the field of both patient and community safety, and to establish a comprehensive framework for policy-making. Although there are indirectly authorized roles in certain areas in many developing countries such as ours, the lack of forensic nursing status may adversely affect patient safety and the effectiveness of forensic processes. While this situation increases the difficulties faced by nurses in performing their forensic duties, it can also create problems with the perspective of public health and safety (on perception and structure) (3).

This review goes beyond a thematic summary of the forensic nursing literature by jointly examining patient safety and community safety, and by discussing the structural, legal, and public implications of forensic nursing within a holistic framework. While existing reviews largely focus on definitions, practice areas, or education, studies addressing the link between patient safety and community health/safety—particularly in relation to legal status and systemic gaps—remain limited. Accordingly, this study makes an original contribution by highlighting the potential risks to patient and community safety stemming from the lack of formal recognition of forensic nursing as a specialized field in Türkiye, and by comparatively discussing this situation with countries where forensic nursing is legally defined. In doing so, the study frames forensic nursing not only as a clinical and forensic practice area, but also as a structural component connected to community safety, public health, and perceptions of justice.

Forensic nursing

Forensic nursing is defined as “the use of nursing science in the examination and investigation of perpetrators of violence, trauma, and other criminal phenomena and victims of trauma/death events by combining forensic science with nursing science” (4). According to the International Association of Forensic Nurses, the work areas of the forensic nurse include interpersonal violence, traumas, human rights violations, public health, and safety (5). Forensic nursing “is the scientific evaluation of cases such as accidents, criminal acts, violence, death and trauma in the clinical field or within the framework of public health of forensic approaches combined with the biopsychosocial education of nurses and their application during treatment and is an integral part of public health” (4). The duties of the forensic nurse are taking a history, physical evaluation, forensic examination, collection, protection of evidence and ensuring the security chain, psychological support, writing forensic reports, and testifying in court (5,6,7).

Patient Safety

Patient safety is based on the principle of “providing benefit, not harm” to patients, which is the most important ethical principle for individuals while receiving health services. In this context, it aims to minimize the risk of harming patients by minimizing errors, to provide safe services, and to ensure the necessary procedures in this direction (8). In recent years, the issue of patient safety in Turkey has gained importance in society in order for patients to know their rights and to be aware of the risks in health services, to reduce medical errors, and to increase the quality in health care. Therefore, patient safety studies are of great importance to predict risks, prevent errors, and ensure the delivery of safe health services. Unfortunately, due to the measures not taken in time, those who benefit from health services face different levels of damage, which can be carried to the legal dimension. In legal processes, the most common practices that occur due to negligence in care, such as medical malpractice, falls, infections, carelessness, or inexperience, are encountered (9,10). Forensic nursing, which is known in our country as a new field of the nursing profession, fulfills an important responsibility at this point.

The absence of formal recognition of forensic nursing as a specialized field in Türkiye creates significant structural vulnerabilities in terms of patient safety. The lack of clearly defined roles, authorities, and responsibilities for nurses encountering forensic cases hinders the development of standardized practices in evidence collection, documentation, and forensic reporting. This situation poses substantial risks to both patient safety and the integrity of forensic processes, particularly in cases involving violence, abuse, and neglect. Studies conducted in Türkiye indicate that nurses involved

in forensic cases are often compelled to rely on individual professional discretion, a practice that increases legal risks while simultaneously heightening the likelihood of secondary victimization (5-7).

In this context, the lack of legal status for forensic nursing constitutes a fundamental structural problem that renders patient safety vulnerable not only at the clinical level but also across ethical and legal dimensions.

Community Health

The concept of Public Health, used for the first time by Charles -Edward A. Winslow in 1920, is defined as “a science and art that improves environmental health conditions, provides health education to individuals, prevents infectious diseases, provides early diagnosis and treatment of diseases, establishes health organizations, improves social studies to ensure a level of life that will maintain the health of each individual as a result of organized community studies, protects from diseases, extends life, and increases physical and mental health and working power” (11).

Public health science, which aims to improve, protect, and develop the health of individuals and communities, serves a wide range of purposes such as preventing diseases, promoting health, examining the effects of environmental factors on health, and providing access to health services. Community health experts work on issues such as combating epidemics, vaccination programs, raising awareness of healthy living, improving eating habits, and reducing environmental risk factors. It provides care and protection support for groups in every stage. In addition, it works on issues such as migration, poverty, and crime, which are among the problems for the welfare of the society, in a support-oriented manner (11).

The relationship between forensic nursing and patient safety

The study areas of forensic nursing are hospitals, schools, prisons, and some forensic units. From a patient safety perspective, hospitals and prisons stand out. However, it should not be forgotten that patients who are not diagnosed continue to pose a risk to society, e.g., individuals with substance use disorders and those without a diagnosed with some mental illness.

People can gain patient status sometimes due to natural reasons and sometimes due to reasons such as violence and natural disasters. In this case, they apply to the health sector in order not to increase the victimization of those who are victims or to regain their health, to protect or improve their current health status. Therefore, when it comes to patient safety, malpractice, that is, medical bad practices, comes to mind. While the USA is ranked third in medical errors with a rate of 9. 5% (12), the rate of errors among healthcare professionals in our country was found to be 38. 3% (13). In

the study conducted in our country, it was determined that 66. 2% of medical errors were medication errors (14).

While forensic nurses take care of individuals who have been traumatized in terms of patient safety and individuals who are defendants, they also ensure patient safety and contribute to the establishment of justice in processes such as evidence collection, documented wound analysis, protection of the victim and the perpetrator, and reporting (15). Forensic nursing focuses on the rights and safety of the individual while working with victims of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. These practices interact with patient safety and forensic nursing roles, which can be summarized as:

- Providing care,
- Research (diagnosis, history taking, documentation, evidence collection)
- Defensive
- Providing psychosocial support
- Consultancy.

For example, in a study conducted in the USA, it was found that the satisfaction rates of individuals receiving services from sexual assault centers increased significantly in both physical recovery processes and legal processes (16). In these centers, forensic nurses create a multidisciplinary safety circle by providing safe evidence collection, emergency medical intervention, and psychosocial support.

It also contributes indirectly to patient safety with its primary and secondary public health approach. Screening and observation for child abuse in suspected cases is an intervention that has been shown to lead to positive outcomes. These benefits include an increase in the reporting rate of alleged maltreatment, improvement in medical record documentation, and an overall increased level of awareness of maltreatment in healthcare providers (17).

The relationship between forensic nursing and community health- safety

In countries where forensic nursing is legally defined, contributions to patient and community safety tend to be more systematic, traceable, and measurable. In particular, the Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) programs implemented in the United States ensure the standardization of care provided to survivors of sexual assault, the preservation of forensic evidence integrity, and the institutionalization of a victim-centered approach within judicial processes. These programs operate in accordance with professional standards established by the International Association of Forensic Nurses (IAFN) and offer substantial benefits in strengthening patient safety and enhancing the effectiveness of forensic

procedures (2,24). By contrast, the absence of a comparable legal and institutional framework in Türkiye limits the visibility of the potential contributions of forensic nursing at the system level and confines practices largely to individual professional efforts.

The intersection between forensic science and public health becomes particularly evident in situations that threaten public health. These can include infectious diseases, violence and crime, migrations, disasters, etc.

Infectious diseases: Forensic nurses also support the recognition of severe diseases (for example, sexually transmitted diseases) through forensic processes and protection and treatment processes in environments such as prisons. Of course, psychological support can also be considered as another dimension of this. For example, in cases of sexual assault, nurses guide the medical treatment process to prevent the spread of infectious diseases (18). Limited living spaces, high population density, and the presence of forced social isolation form the basis for the spread of infectious diseases in prisons. Therefore, the control and prevention of infectious diseases in prisons constitute indirect importance for public health. At this point, forensic nurses play a role in vaccination, hygiene, follow-up and screening, and education (18).

Crime: Crime is an important problem in many societies. This can sometimes be committed against an individual and sometimes against the masses. It brings along physical, mental, and social problems, whether individual or social. In this sense, war crimes, crimes related to toxicological substances, and violence are just a few of them.

Bioterrorism: Bioterrorism is the deliberate use of biological agents (viruses, bacteria, toxins, or other agents) to cause disease or death in humans, animals, or plants. In particular, anthrax, smallpox, plague, botulism, tularemia, and viral hemorrhagic fevers are biological factors that have a negative impact on public health. There remains a significant threat of war that threatens public health and safety. Despite all international efforts, it remains a persistent threat (19,20).

Countries need a robust public health system against such attacks that can occur intentionally or spontaneously and have great destructive effects on society. Support can also be provided during the collection and transfer of evidence at the common work point, at the detection and surveillance point, also at the decontamination point. Vaccination against these biological agents (21) is another forensic nursing approach. For the cases of death, those who play the role of forensic death nursing fulfill their needs. They also help relieve the suffering of families by fulfilling the responsibility given in identification (2).

Toxicological phenomena, Substance abuse: Forensic toxicology plays an important role in substance abuse detection, criminal investigations, and public health interventions. The increasing prevalence of new psychoactive substances, opioid abuse, and drug-related deaths has required advances in toxicological techniques to improve detection accuracy and response strategies (22).

Phenomena such as bioterrorism and suicide actions with chemicals are also in this field of application. The complexity of substance abuse in terms of forensic and public health stems from its multifaceted nature, which includes pharmacological effects, toxicological profiles, and legal considerations. Public health professionals are increasingly burdened with the direct and indirect consequences of substance abuse, including overdose-related deaths, drug-facilitated crimes, and health complications affecting quality of life (22).

Violence: Violence, which is a global public health problem, constitutes an important field of study for forensic nurses. Violence includes domestic violence, intimate partner violence, child abuse, elder abuse, sexual assault, human trafficking, peer violence, gang warfare, terrorism, war, disaster, and intentional and unintentional injuries found in individuals seeking health care after acts of violence in schools, workplaces, and prisons (23). They manifest themselves in human life, especially in vulnerable groups, in different forms, separately or together, with long-term effects on people's lives, primarily psychologically, physically, and sexually (24).

Another area of violence is human trafficking. Human/Immigrant trafficking is a crime against the state, and human trafficking is a crime against human beings. This crime occurs when people migrate to other countries illegally for different reasons, or in rare cases, may occur against their will. In this respect, in the dimension of violence, forensic nurses can;

- ❖ Establish and promote identification, intervention, and prevention programs, aware that sustainable societal change requires research support, the development of public policy, and actions that include the enactment of legislation to effectively reduce and eliminate the causes, consequences, and costs of violence

- ❖ Follow-ups on individuals in the risk group may reduce the risk of becoming a victim or committing a crime. A primary and secondary preventive public health approach should be adopted to identify children, the elderly and women who are at risk of ill-treatment

- ❖ Provide psychological support to the perpetrators and victims of violence and inform them.

- ❖ Provide mental health protection-oriented counseling services and support treatment processes, if any.
- ❖ Monitor the perpetrators in prison in terms of crime and psychology.
- ❖ Perform the process of collecting, reporting, and documenting evidence of suspicious individuals.
- ❖ Can also participate in the necessary treatment and evaluation processes according to the type of violence (23,24).

Natural disasters and mass losses: The increase in natural and man-made disasters occurring in the world and in our country, and the material and moral losses they cause, brings up the question of how disaster processes can be better managed. Effective disaster management is not only limited to avoiding danger, but also important in planning what to do before, during and after the disaster. The high number of injured and disaster victims in disasters, the traumas that make it difficult to identify the individual, the inability to reach relatives, and the related identification and registration procedures make it difficult. In this context, identification by forensic scientists and forensic nurses using forensic methods and recording individuals is very valuable practice in terms of both correct burial and finding missing persons (25,26).

In addition, forensic nurses play a supporting role in social justice. In this sense, they act as experts. They provide the care that not only the victim but also the perpetrator needs. Thus, they fulfill an advocacy role for both parties (2). Every contribution they make to the capture of the perpetrators will both strengthen the sense of justice and reduce the fear of crime.

The lack of an institutional and legal framework for forensic nursing leads to indirect yet significant consequences for community health and safety. The non-standardized management of forensic cases, underreporting of violence and abuse, insufficient monitoring of infectious disease risks, and limited preventive interventions for vulnerable groups are among these consequences. In particular, the absence of a systematic structure for forensic nursing practices in high-risk settings such as prisons, emergency departments, and mental health services may weaken public perceptions of safety and reduce overall public health capacity (4). From this perspective, the absence of a legal definition for forensic nursing should be regarded as a structural problem that affects not only individual patient safety but also the sustainability of community health.

CONCLUSION

Forensic nurses are an important professional field between health and law with initiatives to ensure public health, general welfare, and safety of the society, to increase the

quality of life of individuals, and to reduce the risk of diseases and secondary victimization. The contributions of forensic nurses to public health and safety are focused on emergency medical care, psychological support and monitoring, advocacy and education, and prevention (27). They also contribute indirectly to public security (they provide this support through the collection, reporting, documentation, and transfer of forensic evidence and expertise). They provide trauma-sensitive care with a service approach focused on the principles of privacy and benefit and support the formation of a security culture at both individual and social levels with their responsibilities such as collecting evidence, keeping records, and contributing to legal processes. It is also evident that forensic nurses are critical in achieving goals such as strengthening the perception of justice in society, making violence visible, and empowering vulnerable groups.

In light of these findings, strengthening the contributions of forensic nursing to patient and community safety in Türkiye requires, first and foremost, the formal legal recognition of the profession and the clear definition of its roles and scopes of authority. The development of standardized education and certification programs, the establishment of institutional guidelines for nurses working with forensic cases, and the strengthening of structural collaboration between the health and justice systems constitute key steps in supporting both patient safety and community health. International examples demonstrate that the legal and institutional recognition of forensic nursing is a decisive factor in reducing secondary victimization, enhancing the effectiveness of forensic processes, and strengthening the public perception of justice.

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The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests regarding content of this article.

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Ethical Declaration

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