

Caring for rape and sexual assault victims

Catherine White describes this richly rewarding role

Most people applying to study medicine do so for several reasons, the main one being that they want to make a difference. If you still have that ideal, forensic medicine, especially dealing with rape and sexual assault victims, may be for you.

Intense but engrossing

Over the years there has been a national shortage of doctors doing this work. Women doctors in particular are required. The work is fascinating, intense, but rewarding. So why are so few women doctors attracted to it? Probably because it is perceived as being too emotionally challenging, is done at unsocial hours, and may result in stressful court appearances.

Variety and flexibility

I have been doing this work for 11 years and recommend it. I work at St Mary's Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) in Manchester. There are now 14 other SARCs across the country, including the three "havens" in London. Of course, those areas that don't have SARCs still require doctors. At St Mary's a large team is dedicated to meeting the therapeutic and forensic needs of our clients. We see about 1000 cases a year, of all ages (youngest 7 weeks, oldest in their 90s), both male and female. The doctors in our team have a variety of backgrounds including general practice, paediatrics, accident and emergency, obstetrics and gynaecology, and psychiatry. Working hours are flexible to reflect varying needs and other commitments.

Specialist skills

As the clinical work is different from the work most doctors are used to, it is vital that adequate theoretical and practical training is given, with continued supervision by more experienced colleagues.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Details of the new Faculty of Forensic and Legal Medicine are on the Association of Forensic Physicians website: www.apsweb.org.uk

Court in the act

We see people at their most vulnerable. Helping someone deep in crisis, perhaps in shock after what has happened and unsure what to do, is extremely rewarding and more than compensates for late call-outs. The work also gives a great opportunity to deal with other professions, such as police, barristers, and judges, in a way that adds interest to a working day. Many doctors are frightened about giving evidence in court, but in my experience this is unfounded. With good initial training in examination techniques and procedures and high quality statement writing, court visits are rare. They do occur, however, but training in courtroom skills is available and can make the experience almost enjoyable.

Is it for you?

A good forensic physician will reflect all that is best about the profession: great listening skills, warmth, humanity but ability to be scientific in assessing an account, thoroughness in examinations and documentation, clarity in statement writing, and confidence when presenting in court.

Being qualified to do this work opens many doors

Shortage specialty with media openings

Being qualified to do this work opens many doors. The government is keen for every area to have an SARC. As most SARCs currently struggle to recruit suitably qualified doctors, work opportunities are great. The demand for services is 24/7, which makes flexible working around other commitments possible. For more experienced forensic physicians there is the opportunity to do expert medical reports, which can be lucrative. Many members of the Faculty of Forensic and Legal Medicine have been asked to advise on television programmes, films, and books, and so a career in the media is also a possibility.

On course

Currently there are no minimum training standards for doctors doing this type of work, although there are hopes that this will change. To avoid being put into difficult

Role of forensic physician

THERAPEUTIC

- Injuries—assessment and treatment
- Reassurance
- Pregnancy (emergency contraception, dealing with unplanned pregnancy)
- Sexually transmitted infections (screening, post-exposure prophylaxis)
- Child protection

FORENSIC

- Look for presence or absence of injuries
- Document injuries
- Forensic samples (DNA, fibres, stains (eg, lubricants), Locard's principle (every contact leaves a trace))
- Detection of diseases, illness, signs of previous trauma that might affect interpretation of medical evidence

situations and ultimately feeling isolated, any new doctor entering this field should go on a suitable course and ensure ongoing supervision. Postgraduate qualifications such as the Diploma in Medical Jurisprudence increase one's knowledge and understanding of the relevant issues and add gravitas when in court. The Faculty of Forensic and Legal Medicine would be a good starting point to find out about courses and conferences.

At St Mary's we have launched an innovative course which is aimed at those doing sexual assault work. This is with the backing of the Department of Health, the Faculty of Forensic and Legal Medicine, and in partnership with the University of Manchester. The Forensic and Medical Aspects of Rape and Sexual Assault course started in February 2007; you can find details on www.stmaryscentre.org. This is a modular programme which gives an in-depth knowledge of all areas, including forensic aspects such as injury recognition and documentation and forensic sampling, and also therapeutic aspects.

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Competing interests: CW is employed as the clinical director of the St Mary's Sexual Assault Referral Centre. CW will be paid a fee to organise and teach on the course. Any profits made by the centre through attendance on the St Mary's Course will go into the St Mary's Endowment Fund and not directly benefit CW or any of the other tutors/speakers.