

The Roles of Forensic Nursing in Caring for Individuals with Serious Mental Illness

| Serious Mental Illness and Justice System Involvement

It is a tragic reality that individuals who have serious mental illness (SMI) are over-represented in the criminal legal system. A study by Swanson found that about 1 in 4 individuals who have schizophrenia or bipolar disorder in a public mental health system had been involved in the criminal system for over two years. A study by Fisher and colleagues found that their risk for arrest was highest for lower-level misdemeanor charges. Many of these individuals have vulnerabilities such as co-occurring substance use disorders, trauma histories, and poor social determinants of health. All these point to disparities and intersecting issues with race, poverty, and education levels. It is also well established that individuals who have SMI are more often victims of crime than they are engaged in violence.

Criminal and correctional settings have varied approaches to how they provide care. Even though they are required to deliver care, correctional settings are not designed to be hospitals or to serve as a treatment delivery system. Yet because people who have SMI move between numerous systems across the criminal, forensic, and clinical spaces, these settings desperately need well-trained clinicians. Among them are nursing staff. Nurses are pivotal personnel on a care team. Some nurses who specialize in forensic nursing have a particular expertise and skill set to deliver care in these settings.

| Settings for Forensic Nursing

There are many settings in need of forensic nursing . Forensic nurses create an environment where they can engage individuals who have SMI. They provide a unique skill set that includes both medication and psychosocial intervention expertise, and they can be key leaders in an interdisciplinary environment.

Forensic Settings Where Nurses are Critical and Can Thrive

- ➔ Forensic assertive community treatment (FACT)
- ➔ Mental health courts, including competency restoration
- ➔ Forensic hospitals
- ➔ Assisted outpatient treatment (AOT)
- ➔ Criminal court-ordered community treatment
- ➔ Medical care, including evidence collection for survivors of recent interpersonal violence

Forensic nurses consider the role of trauma and social determinants of health on an individual's health, well-being, quality of life, and symptom picture. This allows them to tailor a treatment plan to the specific needs of an individual. The forensic nurse can be the voice of the patient to the care team. This allows others to also tailor their approaches to be responsive and therapeutic to the unique background of each individual in their care.

Pivotal Roles for Forensic Nurses

- ➔ Deliver trauma-informed care
- ➔ Provide medication management, administration, education, and adherence
- ➔ Establish therapeutic relationship in treatment and recovery
- ➔ Manage of comorbidities
- ➔ Deliver psychotherapy and psychoeducation, particularly regarding trauma neurobiology
- ➔ Provide wellness and resilience interventions for patients and clinicians
- ➔ Participate in research and quality improvement efforts to increase the use and quality of evidence-based practices (EBPs) in forensic settings

| Forensic Nursing and Real-World Scenarios

When a forensic nurse provides care to a person, they utilize trauma-informed principles. This is true across roles such as distribution of medication, working with staff to monitor a unit milieu, participating in medication education, and more. It is likely safe to assume that every person they encounter has a history of some kind of trauma and they approach each individual with that in mind. Forensic nurses can also support people to get the help they need through a variety of clinical and legal means.

Forensic nurses play a critical role on interdisciplinary teams. They work with other professionals such as psychiatrists, social workers, psychologists, certified peer specialists, and more. They share observations and contribute to a treatment planning process that meets the complex needs of individuals. Forensic nurses can often use their unique perspective to help train and model to those in other disciplines. That even includes outside medicine such as law enforcement personnel and prosecutors. They also advocate for individuals' needs in the criminal and civil legal systems and testify as expert and fact witnesses.

| Barriers and Challenges in Forensic Nursing

The work of forensic nurses is challenging. It sits at the interface of the behavioral health and criminal legal systems. This includes correctional settings. There can be secondary trauma exposure when someone hears traumatizing stories or witnesses environments where there may be behavioral dysregulation and even violence. Their work settings may also have:

- ➔ Structural inequalities
- ➔ Scarcity of resources
- ➔ Harsh conditions where they deliver care
- ➔ Intersecting issues related to distrust and marginalization
- ➔ Individuals who do not exhibit prosocial attitudes

For all these reasons and more, the work of forensic nurses can be daunting and feel overwhelming at times. Practice settings should nurture forensic nurses with solid supervision and support. To avoid burnout and fatigue it is critical to support good self-care routines and a solid professional support network.

Forensic nurses have pivotal roles in specific settings that often involve the care of those who have SMI. Nurses are trained to address many important aspects of care beyond symptoms, and then tailor care to meet an individual's needs. They help ensure that both health systems and individuals who receive care thrive. It is also important that nurses take time for self-care to maintain their sense of equanimity across work tasks.

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International Association of Forensic Nurses (IAFN) certifications are available. For information see: <https://www.forensicnurses.org/page/WhatisFN/>

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