

Navigating Forensic Nursing's Ethical-Legal Crossroads

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Received: 01-Nov-2025, Manuscript No. gnfs-25-173428; **Editor assigned:** 03-Nov-2025, PreQC No. gnfs-25-173428(PQ); **Reviewed:** 17-Nov-2025, QC No. gnfs-25-173428; **Revised:** 24-Nov-2025, Manuscript No. gnfs-25-173428(R); **Published:** 01-Dec-2025, **DOI:** 10.4172/2572-0899.1000374

Citation: Al-Hassan DF (2025) Navigating Forensic Nursing's Ethical-Legal Crossroads. Glob J Nurs Forensic Stud 09: 374.

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Abstract

Forensic nursing operates at the critical intersection of healthcare and justice, presenting unique ethical and legal challenges. Key issues include navigating informed consent from vulnerable populations and balancing patient confidentiality with duties to report [1, 10]. Trauma-informed care is an ethical imperative for building trust and preventing re-traumatization [2]. Meticulous adherence to legal protocols for evidence collection, including digital evidence, is crucial for justice [6, 9]. Nurses act as vital advocates for victims, requiring strong ethical competencies and support systems [5, 7, 8]. This complex field demands continuous education and policy development to ensure ethical, legally sound, and compassionate care.

Keywords

Forensic Nursing; Ethical Challenges; Legal Aspects; Informed Consent; Confidentiality; Trauma-Informed Care; Evidence Collection; Victim Advocacy; Digital Evidence; Vulnerable Populations

Introduction

Forensic nursing demands careful navigation of significant ethical and legal challenges. This work delves into complexities like securing informed consent from vulnerable populations and the delicate balance of maintaining patient confidentiality versus the professional duty to report certain findings [1].

A foundational aspect in forensic nursing is the application of trauma-informed care [2]. This isn't merely a best practice; it's seen as an ethical imperative. By truly understanding and effectively responding to a patient's history of trauma, nurses are better equipped to build essential trust and, crucially, to avoid any re-traumatization. This approach is fundamental for providing care that is both humane

and highly effective, especially within the sensitive contexts inherent to forensic practice.

Privacy and confidentiality remain central concerns, particularly within forensic psychiatric nursing. In this specialized area, there's often a tension between upholding patient autonomy and meeting stringent legal requirements [3]. Nurses in this field frequently walk a tightrope, striving to build and maintain patient trust while simultaneously adhering to strict disclosure laws. This constant balancing act makes clear, actionable ethical guidelines absolutely essential for their practice.

The process of obtaining informed consent for forensic examinations is notably complex [4]. This article underscores the fine line nurses must walk between collecting vital evidence for legal proceedings and respecting a patient's fundamental right to choose, a challenge amplified when working with victims of trauma. It heavily emphasizes that clear, empathetic communication and ensuring the patient's true understanding—far beyond just obtaining a signature—are critical for practice that is truly ethically sound.

Forensic nurses regularly confront challenging ethical dilemmas

in their daily work [5]. These situations range from balancing a patient's immediate welfare with pressing legal obligations to managing care within significant resource limitations. Such scenarios demand not only sharp critical thinking but also a strong ethical framework to guide decision-making. The consensus is that robust support systems and explicit guidelines are indispensable for assisting nurses in navigating these morally complex waters effectively.

Regarding legal aspects, the collection of evidence in forensic nursing is a meticulous process [6]. This article highlights the absolute necessity for nurses to adhere to precise legal protocols when both collecting and preserving evidence. Even minor deviations can potentially compromise an entire legal case. Therefore, a thorough understanding of concepts like the chain of custody, meticulous documentation, and appropriate collection techniques is not just a procedural matter; it forms the very foundation of ensuring justice.

Forensic nurses hold a powerful position as advocates for victims of violence [7]. However, this vital role comes with significant ethical responsibilities. This particular article investigates how nurses deftly manage their advocacy duties while simultaneously preserving professional boundaries, ensuring the victim's autonomy, and consistently operating within the established legal and ethical frameworks designed to protect both the victim and the nursing professional.

Looking at the global landscape, it's clear that specific legal and ethical competencies are essential for forensic nurses [8]. This article argues convincingly that a deep, solid understanding of relevant laws and ethical principles isn't merely an advantage; it is absolutely non-negotiable for effective and responsible practice across diverse jurisdictions. This foundational knowledge is what truly empowers nurses to make well-informed and sound decisions within the often-challenging forensic environments they encounter.

The proliferation of digital evidence introduces new and complex ethical and legal challenges for forensic nurses [9]. This paper addresses the intricate processes involved in collecting, preserving, and ultimately presenting digital data, which can range from social media content to information found on mobile devices. It strongly emphasizes the critical need for nurses to develop high levels of skill in digital forensics, thereby ensuring that patient privacy is rigorously protected while all crucial evidence is handled in a lawful and proper manner.

A particularly critical area in forensic nursing involves assessing a vulnerable patient's capacity to provide consent [10]. This represents a substantial ethical and legal hurdle, especially when dealing

with populations whose decision-making abilities may be compromised or diminished. The article underscores the paramount importance of conducting thorough, compassionate assessments to guarantee that consent is genuinely informed and freely given, thereby safeguarding the patient's rights above all else.

Description

Forensic nursing inherently involves a complex interplay of profound ethical and stringent legal challenges, placing unique demands on its practitioners. At the forefront of these demands are intricate issues surrounding consent, particularly when engaging with vulnerable populations who may have diminished capacity to make truly informed decisions [1, 4, 10]. Nurses are tasked with the delicate act of navigating the fine line between securing critical evidence for legal proceedings and unequivocally upholding a patient's fundamental right to choose, which necessitates clear communication and ensuring genuine understanding that goes far beyond a mere signature on a form. Coupled with the complexities of consent, maintaining strict confidentiality presents another significant and persistent hurdle. Forensic nurses frequently find themselves caught between protecting patient privacy and fulfilling their legal obligations to report certain findings, a situation that requires a nuanced and deep understanding of evolving disclosure laws and the precise boundaries of their professional role [1, 3].

A cornerstone of truly ethical and effective forensic nursing practice is the dedicated implementation of trauma-informed care [2]. This approach isn't just considered a best practice; it's rightly viewed as an ethical imperative within the field. By consciously acknowledging and empathetically responding to a patient's history of trauma, nurses are much better equipped to foster essential trust and, crucially, to avoid any potential re-traumatization during interactions. This patient-centered methodology ensures the delivery of care that is both humane and exceptionally effective, especially within the often sensitive and inherently high-stakes forensic contexts. Beyond the realm of direct clinical care, forensic nurses also serve as powerful and vital advocates for victims of violence [7]. This essential advocacy role necessitates careful consideration of professional boundaries and an unwavering commitment to victim autonomy, all while consistently operating within established legal and ethical frameworks that are specifically designed to protect both the vulnerable patient and the nursing professional from potential harm or compromise.

The legal dimensions underpinning forensic nursing are both extensive and absolutely critical, particularly concerning the metic-

ulous process of evidence collection. It is imperative that nurses rigorously adhere to precise legal protocols for not only collecting but also preserving and thoroughly documenting evidence [6]. Any procedural misstep, even a seemingly minor one such as a breach in the chain of custody, carries the serious potential to jeopardize an entire legal case, undermining justice. With the rapid evolution of technology, the forensic landscape now prominently includes digital evidence, which introduces entirely new layers of complexity [9]. Consequently, forensic nurses must continually develop and refine specialized skills in digital forensics to competently and lawfully handle data sourced from various platforms, including social media or mobile devices. This ensures that patient privacy is rigorously protected while all crucial information and evidence are secured and managed appropriately.

Daily practice for forensic nurses is frequently punctuated by tough and often morally ambiguous ethical dilemmas [5]. These challenging situations can range widely, from balancing a patient's immediate welfare against pressing legal mandates to managing the delivery of care amidst significant resource limitations and systemic pressures. Such scenarios invariably call for astute critical thinking, profound moral reasoning, and a robust ethical framework to guide sound decision-making. To effectively navigate these persistent challenges, forensic nurses require specific and well-honed legal and ethical competencies, an understanding that holds true on a global scale [8]. This foundational knowledge is precisely what empowers them to make judicious and responsible decisions in complex circumstances. Therefore, continuous education, proactive policy development, and the establishment of strong, accessible support systems are consistently identified as absolutely vital for equipping nurses with the necessary tools and resilience required to manage these morally challenging situations and uphold the highest standards of professional practice [1, 5]. The field constantly evolves, demanding adaptive expertise.

Conclusion

Forensic nursing operates at the complex intersection of healthcare and the justice system, presenting unique ethical and legal challenges. A core theme is the navigation of consent, particularly from vulnerable populations, and maintaining strict confidentiality while adhering to duties to report [1, 10]. This requires nurses to master clear communication and ensure genuine understanding, not just a mere signature, to uphold ethical practice [4, 10]. The field also emphasizes the critical role of trauma-informed care, recognizing it as an ethical imperative. Understanding and responding to a patient's trauma history helps nurses build trust and avoid re-traumatization,

which is fundamental to providing humane and effective care in sensitive forensic contexts [2]. Privacy and confidentiality are constant concerns, especially in forensic psychiatric nursing, where patient autonomy can clash with legal requirements, demanding clear ethical guidelines [3]. Legal aspects are equally paramount, particularly regarding evidence collection. Nurses must follow precise legal protocols for collecting, preserving, and documenting evidence to avoid compromising a case. This includes understanding the chain of custody and proper techniques, which are foundational to justice [6]. With the increasing prevalence of digital evidence, forensic nurses now need skills in digital forensics to handle data lawfully while protecting privacy [9]. Beyond clinical care, forensic nurses serve as powerful advocates for victims of violence. This role necessitates careful navigation of advocacy responsibilities, professional boundaries, and ensuring victim autonomy within established legal and ethical frameworks [7]. Ultimately, possessing a solid understanding of relevant laws and ethical principles is non-negotiable for effective and responsible practice, empowering nurses to make sound decisions in challenging forensic environments [8]. Ongoing education, policy development, and robust support systems are consistently highlighted as crucial for helping nurses navigate these morally challenging waters [1, 5].

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