

Training the Nation's Sexual Assault Forensic Examiners

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Attending the presentation ***A Review of Current Practices, Policies and Recommendations for Applying the Use of SPs, GTAs and MUTAs for Training and Competency Assessment of Sexual Assault Forensic Examiners*** lead by presenters, **Isle Polonko**, New Jersey Medical School, and **Scott George**, Clinical Skills USA, was my first ASPE conference experience and I couldn't have been more impressed.

The presentation reviewed trends and practices of working with SPs and Gynecological Teaching Associates (GTAs) in training Sexual Assault Forensic Examiners. These forensic professionals require very specialized training, as one can imagine, as do the SPs and GTAs working with these learners. Not only is the exam itself sensitive and in need of a high degree of training, it has the added components of the portrayal of a patient coping with heavy emotions. Additionally, the complex evidence collection requirements must be familiar to the SPs or GTAs even if they are not personally responsible for skills checklist completion. Poor evidence collection, of course, can compromise a case in a real victim situation. It was invaluable to learn different training strategies offered by various institutions.

The format and structure of each program is unique; many variations on the roles of the SP/GTA exist. Here are some examples of the formats that are in current practice:

- An SP is asked to simulate the victim/patient interview and a GTA is then brought in to allow for exam practice in completion of the evidence collection kit (exam).
- GTAs are hired to allow learners to solely focus on the detail of evidence collection.
- The SP/GTA plays the role **and** completes the checklist.
- Some hybrid formats have the SP do a checklist, the GTA do a checklist and have faculty/supervisor observing in the room.

In the program at EVMS, the SP/GTA plays both roles undergoing intensive training on what is necessary on the checklist. They are then also responsible to watch the forensic examiner and complete the checklist at the end of the session. Feedback to the forensic examiner is included on the checklist.

Sessions can be structured to have a variety of learning objectives, for example, a session may be applied to *training* new examiners or it can focus on the *assessment* of the more

experienced examiners' skills. In assessing current skills, cases can be presented by an SP/GTA, followed by completion of a detailed checklist reflecting whether protocol was or was not followed.

Other comprehensive training programs were discussed, some involving members of the police force, prosecutors, forensic examiners and victims advocate groups in a simulated two day, 'start to finish,' event. In this model, members of various departments involved in criminal investigation, evidence collection, and prosecution, are taken through a crime scene, interview the victim and possible suspects, conduct the examinations and, on the second day, attend a simulated trial. The SPs/GTAs play different roles according to the needs of the learners. Some SPs play victims only. Some GTAs simulate the rape kit / exam collection portion of the exam only. Some have the GTA also act the victim role during the simulation and role play. Other SPs are used to portray the perpetrators, the court judge, witnesses, etc. The possibilities are endless.

The presentation was especially valuable for new GTA/MUTA programs, as it explained how to provide services to a not often considered client base, as mentioned above. A challenge, and an opportunity, is training service providers in rural communities. This specialized training can be particularly difficult when the nearest hospital is an hour outside the community and appropriate medical staff is scarce. SPs/ GTAs who have been trained in this capacity can be a great resource to rural communities. The presenters encouraged participants to reach out to their local forensic examiner associations (those associations that certify examiners) and/or local hospitals and victims advocacy groups. There may not be much you can do in reaching out to rural areas, except to be prepared to think through some scheduling and transportation options.

The presentation leaders expertly facilitated these and other discussion points throughout the presentation. The "pearl" I took away is that there is an opportunity for GTA program expansion out there and a lot of different formats to use! For my experience, it was a terrific beginning to a wonderful conference.