



Comforting victims, tracking attackers

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He beat her. He raped her. He left her for dead as he pushed her from his van onto a rural road.

But the 26-year-old half-naked woman walked and crawled her way to a home in Montcalm County where she collapsed on a porch into a fetal position.

The rape survivor's injuries were so severe she was flown from a Greenville Hospital to Spectrum Health Butterworth, where they readied the nearly dead woman for emergency surgery. She had multiple injuries, including a perforated bowel.

And as they prepped her body for surgery, a special nurse with a trained eye noticed a bite mark on the woman's breast. She asked a simple question: "May I swab that bite?"

That collection of DNA evidence from a YWCA forensic nurse examiner, who happened to also work in the Butterworth emergency room, resulted in the 2003 conviction of Charles Marion Waldron Jr., sending the 52-year-old rapist to prison for 30 to 60 years.

It's a prime example of the difference trained forensic nurses make in sending sex offenders to prison, said Kent County Assistant Prosecutor Helen Brinkman, who didn't try that case but readily recalls details, such as the fact the victim twice misidentified the man in lineups.

The Nurse Examiner Program was the first in the state 10 years ago, and Brinkman, who specializes in sex crimes, was skeptical.

"I thought the victims deserved a doctor," Brinkman said.

Now, she lauds a decade of better evidence gathered by nurse examiners, allowing her to make her case against a rapist. Sometimes, only the DNA from a bite or scrape will link the attacker to the victim.

But there's more to it than collecting evidence. Having program volunteers available 24 hours a day allows victims to feel support and receive priority treatment.

"Women who are sexually assaulted have so many issues, depression, job loss, dropping out of school," said YWCA executive director Carla Blinkhorn. "There are some good studies that prove that the sooner you get the intervention, the least likely the victim to suffer from post-traumatic stress. We try to keep the women from having even more challenges."

Wayne County is starting such a program this year. Forensic nurses also work in Holland, Muskegon, and Kalamazoo. And talks are under way to expand the YWCA forensic program to domestic violence cases, Blinkhorn said.

Winning over skeptics

It started with a group of nurses who recognized rape patients were underserved, and the YWCA asking nurses what problems they could address, said Linda Rossman, manager of the Nurse Examiner Program.

Hospital officials, law enforcement, Planned Parenthood and the state forensic laboratory were involved in three years of planning. The program is funded by the Nokomis and Sebastian Foundation and donor support.

"There were skeptics in this community who thought the medical community and the community at large would not accept the Nurse Examiner Program," Rossman said.

That has changed.

Nurse examiners are not required to report to police but still can collect and document evidence for use at a later date if the victim decides to press charges. When a rape victim seeks treatment, the nurse gets a brief medical history followed by a thorough exam. Forensic evidence is collected and medications provided.

For nearly two hours, nurses collect samples of hair, saliva and blood and any foreign body they may see. They photograph bites and bruises. They photograph genitalia injuries with a culpascope that measures and magnifies injuries unseen by the naked eye.

Some women don't want the exam. They just want to get checked and receive medicines so they don't get infected or pregnant.

There was a time when rape victims waited in hospital emergency rooms as trauma cases received priority.

"They'd watch accident victims and other emergencies getting treated before them, and rightly so," Brinkman said. "But in that sitting and waiting and waiting and waiting, they'd start the internal questions of 'Why am I here?' 'Should I pursue this?'"

It was a slow hell.

Rape survivors have told Brinkman they still could smell the suspect on them. They felt dirty, exposed.

Emergency room doctors, not trained in sexual abuse, would perform a rape kit but nothing thorough because other emergencies were backing up.

On the witness stand, doctors would say they saw no trauma, and Brinkman recognized they didn't have time to look.

That changed with forensic nurses.

The nurses' work and testimony make an impression on jurors. While they are not the tool of the prosecutor, their work has taken sex offenders off the street, supporters say.

"The quality of the information documented is incomparable," Brinkman said. "The difference between then and now -- they're a godsend."

For the nurses, providing medical care is just as important, as is assessing whether the victim needs a place to stay -- which is especially important because most victims know their attacker.

"The stranger rapes are the ones we hear about in the paper," said forensic nurse specialist Chris Dunnick, program coordinator. "But 75 to 80 percent are acquaintances or known, even if it's just been a few hours."

Expanding the program?

That familiarity with an attacker is at the heart of the challenge in domestic violence cases, and it is why

officials want to expand the program to include such cases, hopefully within 18 months.

Emergency rooms are mandated to contact police in domestic violence cases. That can cause patients to lie about how they were injured, Rossman said.

That, in turn, creates a problem in court, if the victim does press charges, because doctors must report what they were told -- such as a slip on the stairs rather than getting thrown down the stairs.

A proposed change would have forensic nurses take photographs, said Rossman, an emergency room nurse.

"In domestic violence, a picture is worth a thousand words," she said.

The YWCA also provides emergency shelter and has resources and counseling programs for victims of violence.

'Creeps are everywhere'

Three years after the Montcalm County rape, the victim is 30. The young mother grew up in Ionia County, knew the area and felt comfortable being by herself there, even in the bars. Her family had a cottage in neighboring Montcalm County.

"For a small community like that, you don't think it would happen in a small community. I wouldn't," she said. "But now I know creeps are everywhere."

She doesn't remember much of her time in the hospital. She remembers hearing the nurse ask the doctors for permission to swab her breast.

"If it wasn't for them people, I think he'd be still on the street," she said. "That's good, he won't be able to hurt anybody else even if he gets out for parole. He's an older man."

She said she doesn't drink anymore and doesn't go into crowds by herself.

"I'm more cautious," she said. "There are a lot who have to be."

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