

Beyond the Screen: The Expanding Role of Forensic Nursing in Managing Cybercrime Victimization

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ABSTRACT

Cybercrime victimisation holds significant relevance in the present-day scenario of criminal activities around the world. Cybercrime victimisation occurs in many different ways. It may be from cyberbullying to digital stalking, revenge pornography to online sexual exploitation, and online platforms being used for human trafficking, to name a few examples. For solving these cases, forensic evidence is needed. Forensic nurses need to know how to respond to such cases when these cases are brought to them. They need knowledge about these crimes to effectively deal with them and report them. Forensic Nurses require skills to solve such cases by identifying, collecting and preserving the related pieces of online evidence. They should be able to make foolproof documentation in such cases.

They need to provide trauma-informed care to such victims and should be able to provide first aid in mental health care in such cases, in addition to their routine roles as forensic nurses. They will be required to work in collaboration with cyber experts to deal with the digital evidence, taking due care of their legal mandates as well as taking care of the ethical aspects in such cases. Forensic nurses must have digital literacy. They should have an awareness of different types of digital crimes and how to collect online evidence of digital crime to successfully prosecute the culprits of digital crime.

Keywords: Cybercrime, Digital crime, Forensic nursing, Cyber victimisation.

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INTRODUCTION

Social media is used frequently by medical and nursing professionals, including forensic nurses. They are supposed to utilize this media effectively but keeping in mind the laws and ethics of use because they are dealing with the patients. They sometimes wish to highlight the successes of their professional achievements. Still, they should remember they should not do anything that may jeopardize the details of their patients and their patients become the victims in this cyberspace.^{1,2} This is usually the lack of awareness of the rules of digital use of the data. In other circumstances, some people may use digital data deliberately to harm another person, and such persons may become the victims of cybercrime.

Digital literacy

It is defined as the capability to solve problems by practising digital tools and technologies, and use the resources in an ethical manner to find, critically evaluate, create, and communicate information and handle the data skilfully.³

Forensic Nursing Science

Forensic Nursing Science is a branch of science that is a combination of knowledge and practice of Nursing health care, the criminal justice system and forensic sciences, including forensic medicine when applied to criminal investigation and the judicial system of a country.⁴

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Growth of Cybercrime

Cybercrimes are increasing day by day. This is due to the increased availability of the internet, and the majority of people are digitally illiterate or not sufficiently literate to prevent such crimes. Though financial frauds top the list of crimes yet online sextortion is one such crime where forensic nurses may get the opportunity to investigate such cases.⁵

There is a rising trend of cybercrimes in India and worldwide. In India, reported cases of cybercrime in 2018 were 208,456; 394,599 in 2019; 1158,208 cases in 2020; 1402809 cases in 2021.⁵

Cybercrimes against children increased by 32% in 2022 as compared to 2021, and these include child pornography, cyberstalking, bullying and distribution of dirty material with

children in it.⁶ 200 arrests have been made for cybercrime against children.⁷

Crimes destabilise the economy as social trust is undermined and harm the communities.⁸

Digital literacy for Nurses

Digital literacy will help nurses use their electronic records of patients. Health data can be accessed and analysed for better patient outcomes. Digital literacy among nurses is improving, but it is still not at a desired level. Low literacy makes them prone to cybercrimes. Low literacy also makes it difficult to deal with digital and cybercrimes.^{9,10}

Digital literacy for Forensic Nurses

Though forensic nurses are more aware but still the level of literacy needs to be improved to make them efficient in handling cases of cybercrimes. They lack specialised training.¹¹

Digital Crime

There are crimes that are done or facilitated on digital platforms or using digital techniques. These technologies are rapidly advancing, and so is the ease with which the offenders can perpetrate these crimes.¹¹

Different types of Digital Crimes

Financial crimes, identity thefts, and unauthorised access in 2024: 62% of cases of cybercrimes involved finances.⁷ A few examples are being given below, but this is not a complete list of the digital crimes to which forensic nurses can come across in their professional capacity.¹¹

- *Cyberbullying*

When bullying is done using some online technique, social media, or texting,¹² and victim is afraid that if he tells this to his parents or teachers, the instrument through which he is being bullied will be taken away from him. Mostly children and people of a young age¹³ are bullied online. Cyberbullying involves intimidation, denigration, exclusion, flaming, outing and trickery.^{11,14} Mostly it is by the internet or mobile phones.¹³

- *Digital stalking*

Unwanted tracking or surveillance is done using GPS or hacking. This is a form of bullying that also happens online.^{11,14} Cyberstalking usually leads to fear, as this is usually repeated a number of times.¹⁵

- *Online sexual abuse*

Persons wish to know others online for some sexual activity, and later on, they are pressured or persuaded into sexual abuse. Lower self-esteem, Poor psychological health, poor relationship with parents, and risk-taking behaviour are precursors for being victims of online abuse.¹⁶ Initiation and facilitation of sexual abuse are helped by digital technology. Victims of online sexual abuse were more prone to develop psychopathy, depression and PTSD.¹⁷ Online sexual abuse of children is from 13.5 to 21.7% in one of the studies. First, there are voluntary online sexual

acts, and then there is nonconsensual sharing the images. This leads to psychological stress.¹⁸

- *Online sexual exploitation*

one of the studies conducted in the Philippines shows that poverty and low socioeconomic factors play a major role in it, and, for earning money, parents are involved in it. Children involved in this study ranged from 18 months to 18 years, with customers both local and foreigners in the cybersex dens, with different platforms being used, from online dating sites to Facebook and Skype. There were erotic displays as well as forced sex. This exploitation, in some cases, lasted for many years. This is also known as webcam child sexual tourism and cyber child porn. It has ill effects for the exploited children, for the well-being of the victims, both socially and health-wise.¹⁹

- *Emotional abuse*

It is well established that emotional abuse in children produces anxiety and depression when they grow up and increases susceptibility to psychiatric illnesses, and a person has neuroticism.²⁰ These effects may be affected by many internal and external factors.²¹ Females and those families with one partner abusing the other are more prone to such abuse, especially when the Intimate Partner Violence is considered.²² Emotional content use is more prevalent with online technologies, so emotional competencies should be promoted when using online technologies.²³ It may involve remote monitoring and technology-facilitated abuse.²⁴ Young people often seek help from anonymous communities and persons in such cases.²⁵

- *Revenge pornography*

sexually explicit images of others without their consent are posted to defame or take revenge for some motives or entertainment. In some cases, motives may be political, and this is becoming a worldwide phenomenon. This may be done by heterosexuals, lesbians and gays.²⁶ It is used for the harassment of the victims, and it humiliates them. It happens more with women.²⁷ Usually, it happens when a relationship breaks down, and it used to cause fear and psychological harm.²⁸

- *Grooming*

it is a process of preparation of a child or vulnerable adult by a perpetrator to gain the trust so that the person can be sexually abused later on. Evidence of grooming can help in the prosecution of the offender.²⁹ It can be a precursor to sexual assault offline.³⁰

- *Intimate partner abuse*

Intimate partner cyber abuse is increasing in the world. Intimate Partners are threatened and intimidated. They are humiliated and harassed. Such conditions need intervention. When managing IPV and abuse, managing emotional abuse should be considered.²² Resources may be many for the abusers, but for the victims, technologies often fall short.³¹ Usually, after separation, women suffer from their ex-partners as they are



using mobile phones, the internet, and GPS systems.³² Online help and interventions are available for the persons involved with intimate partner cyber abuse.³³

- *Online human trafficking*

The internet is used for human trafficking, usually through illicit websites and social networks, through hidden advertisements and messages for illegal services.³⁴ In the process of illegal migration, persons become victims or modern slaves.³⁵

Effects of Digital Crime on the Victims

As most of these crimes remain invisible to others so there are more chances that the victim may not discuss with others, leading to isolation associated with anxiety, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Due to the fear of stigma, they remain silent and do not seek help.^{17,36}

Cyberbullying may lead to decreased satisfaction in life, distress and suicidal ideation. Cyberbullying detection software may help in the detection of cyberbullying.³⁷

Women are killed after they are separated from their abusers.³²

Evidence in Digital Crime

Digital evidence has some properties that distinguish it from physical evidence. Digital evidence is tangible, and it is generated by the users and the system. Specific regulations for this evidence are not yet clear.³⁸ It may be information or data that is stored or transmitted electronically, which can help in the detection of crime and the prosecution of the offender. It may help to show the intent of the offender or may be an alibi for the crime or criminal.^{38,39} These may be audio, video or text and images. These may be screenshots and chats on mobiles, computers and networks.

Techniques used by the perpetrators are getting more sophisticated, e.g., encryption. Deep web and darknet are providing tools for illegal work, and their detection is becoming harder and harder, almost impossible in certain situations⁴⁰

Identifying the Evidence

Such data is fragile and sensitive. This data must be complete, accurate and authentic. This must be convincing to the court so that it is accepted in the court.³⁸ Investigating officer should be able to evaluate and assess it. Digital instruments will be able to work as digital evidence, and the crime scene will be digital.⁴¹ Volume and vastness of digital evidence are becoming huge, and identifying the evidence is a huge problem.⁴⁰

Collection of Digital Evidence

It needs careful handling. It is very vulnerable to changes. Evidence collection protocols for digital crimes should be followed. Never forget to collect screenshots and chats with time stamps. First responders at the crime scene have a big responsibility to collect this evidence. Blockchain technology is used.⁴² Fundamental rights of persons must be respected while collecting such evidence.³⁸

Device handling and collection should be properly done. The data is vulnerable to attacks.⁴³

Preserving the Evidence

It requires sophisticated methods to preserve it. Preserve the data carefully in folders with strong passwords. Keep the machines also password-protected and in safe hands and safe places. Handling the digital evidence is very important, and the chain of evidence should never be forgotten. A secure system should be used to store and transfer the data.

A two-level blockchain can be utilised to manage the digital data and maintain the chain of custody. Hot and cold blockchain can be applied. Hot blockchain can be used for identity and investigation, whereas cold blockchain can be utilised for videos.⁴³

Documentation should be Foolproof

Their trauma needs documentation as well as validation, and it should be done correctly and meticulously.¹⁰ They should not be shy of collaborating with cyber experts and law enforcement agencies, as collaboration will provide more useful results.¹¹

Handling of Victims of Digital Crimes

Telehealth can be useful in such circumstances for anonymous help. Crisis counselling plays a very important role in such circumstances.

Trauma-informed Care

To know the impact of trauma on victims is important, and how this can be minimised by trauma-informed care is important for forensic nurses. Core principles of trustworthiness should be taken care of so that victims can be safely treated and empowered⁴⁴

All those victims and survivors must be provided trauma-informed care. Victims may be from diverse circumstances, but they should be treated in such a way that they do not feel retraumatized when care is being provided to them. Disclosure by the patients, screening of the patients, relationship between the provider and victims, with minimum agony, taking care of the full autonomy of the victims, though relevant information should be provided for agreeing or not agreeing to a suggested intervention.⁴⁵

Psychological help to the Victims of Cybercrime

Forensic nurses must be psycho-educated so that they know how to deal with the victims of trauma.⁴⁶ It is a great time for forensic nurses to show their abilities as counsellors to help the victims come out of this trauma. They should advocate for their cause to make them resilient and productive members of society.

Ethics in Forensic Nursing in Digital Crimes

Informed consent is very important in sharing the digital evidence. Due care is needed when victims are minors or cognitively impaired for some reason. Those people who are

in crisis are especially emotionally impaired, and special care should be taken in such cases while collecting the digital evidence from them. Data to be collected in some cases may be very sensitive, as it may be concerned with financial transactions or intimate scenes. If this data is not handled carefully, there is a chance that it may become a case of revictimization.

MATERIAL & METHODS

Academic search engine Google Scholar has been used to find the relevant literature i.e. Journal articles, conference papers using the key words. Google Search engine has been used to supplement the scholarly research for some reports and whitepapers from reputed organizations and government websites and academic institutions which have been used to review the current situation and their applicability for the forensic nurses. Only relevant material available in English has been used. Materials from non-credible sources and not in English have been excluded. A thematic analysis was conducted for recurring patterns, gaps and emerging trends. Methodological strengths and limitations were studied by comparative evaluation.

DISCUSSION

Forensic nurses are merging the clinical care of the victims with the advocacy of their legal rights and helping in the prosecution of the digital offenders. Digital literacy amongst forensic nurses is a must so that offenders can be successfully prosecuted in the present-day judicial system.

Digital crime victims often have trauma that is not visible, but such victims require special attention. Forensic nurses can become a bridge in such cases and provide holistic care.

CHALLENGES

There is a complex system of collecting the evidence, and forensic nurses are not taught anything about digital crimes in their curriculum.

There will be cross-border jurisdiction challenges. There may be legal conflicts as well as privacy challenges in collecting the evidence. While making decisions in such cases, one should be aware of the local laws, but should not forget the international privacy laws.

Exposure to different types of digital evidence may drain the forensic nurses emotionally. This may result in professional burnout, and it is very important to recognise this amongst forensic nursing professionals.

Ethical Dilemmas

Forensic nurses have to be loyal to the victims. At the same time, they have to be loyal to the judicial system of their countries. A conflict can arise while collecting evidence and

being loyal to the victims. This may be more common when intimate examination is to be done, as it is a must for successful prosecution, but may not be liked by the victims.

Sometimes situation may be emotionally surcharged, but forensic nurses should never be biased.

Methods to Overcome the Challenges

Disclosure of the evidence should be minimal and only to those for whom it is legally required.

In ethical dilemmas, established ethical frameworks should be followed. Wherever there is a doubt, principles of beneficence, autonomy, non-maleficence, and justice should be followed.

Still, if there is doubt, it is better to follow evidence-based circumstances.⁴⁷

Consultation with the Hospital ethics committee and legal advisors can be useful in many circumstances when you are not able to make a decision.

Specialised courses can be started for forensic nursing, where they can be taught the complexities of dealing with cyber and digital crime victims and survivors and the use of social media.⁴⁸

Personal beliefs should never stand in the way of a rightful approach. Biases can be mitigated by the regular training of forensic nurses on how to avoid biases.

After recognising the professional burnouts, one should not shy away the professional support. Debriefing after the sessions helps in recognising burnout, and timely help can be provided.

Forensic nurses can be made members of the cybersecurity units. In the national health policy, this issue should be given due importance.

Expansion of telehealth can also help in this process to deal with cases of digital and cybercrimes.

15 cyber forensic labs have been established in different parts of India, and the Data Protection bill was passed in 2023, and now there is the Digital Personal Data Protection Act to curb cyber-crimes. Collaboration with the social apps and telecom operators has helped to investigate the cases in a better way. The use of artificial Intelligence in the detection of cybercrimes has made the detection of cybercrimes better.⁷

Awareness

Various adverse events in childhood can create changes in the body which can be at the molecular level, cellular level, or at the level of organs and show their effect on the development in physical, emotional and behavioural health. Providing a safe environment is very important, and this should be taken care of by forensic nurses.⁴⁶

When forensic nurses are aware, they can help by creating virtual digital trauma clinics, especially in the underserved regions of their countries and other parts of the world. There should be trauma-informed care policies, and these policies should be implemented properly so that the survivor is not revictimized.



Public awareness should be created so that the stigma associated with various types of trauma can be reduced.⁴⁴

One of the authors has developed toolkits for the software on the computer-based programs to guard the computers from cybercrimes.⁴⁹

Training and Courses

Forensic nurses should be trained to foster a safe physical and emotional environment for the victims and survivors, and it is very important to prevent re-traumatisation. The patient should be fully involved in all the decisions of the treatment so that they become part of the team.⁴⁴

Specialised courses can be initiated where forensic nurses are taught the details of handling digital crime, evidence collection and documentation of such crimes with special reference to the cases in which vulnerable sections of the society can become the victims.

Team Work

A forensic nurse can help in building a case of digital crime, as well as help the victim come out of this turmoil. She can help in recovery from this emotional trauma in a holistic manner. She may need to work as a member of the team, involving investigating agencies and experts from other fields.

There is a need to collaborate with those who can be helpful in this process of providing treatment and collecting the evidence.⁴⁴

CONCLUSION

It is utmost necessary that forensic nurses adapt to the realities of the modern day, in which digital crimes are going to be more common. They need to learn the identification of digital crimes, the collection of digital crimes and preserving them. Meticulous documentation will play a great role, and they should become expert in it. There will be technological and ethical challenges, and they should be able to overcome these challenges by various means, including teamwork. They should be part of the team to provide healing and justice, along with validation. It is time for policymakers and educators to propagate this cause of strengthening the role of forensic nurses in the investigation of digital crimes. There is a need to educate, innovate and advocate for changes in the existing system.

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