

BEYOND AUTOPSIES: TREADING NEW HORIZONS

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INTRODUCTION

The brunt of the Medico-legal work in Sri Lanka is carried out by the Judicial Medical Officers (JMO) attached to the Ministry of Health and Senior Academics attached to the Departments of Forensic Medicine in State Universities. They are mainly involved in conducting judicial autopsies and examining clinical forensic cases. The many branches of Medicine are continuously evolving. Forensic Medicine is no exception. This unique branch had to evolve to meet the current demands from the general public, colleagues from the same profession and other professionals who are directly and indirectly connected to medico-legal work. A proper vision towards the 21st century would reap the fruits of success in the near future. The achievements yet to come need the support of all relevant authorities. Discussed below are some points to ponder.

DISCUSSION

The forensic autopsies usually end with the issuance of the cause of death. A professional conversation between the forensic pathologist and the relatives of the deceased regarding the important issues pertaining to the death seldom occurs. In certain instances the relatives are so desperate to get proper information regarding their beloved one's death. Nowadays most of the individuals have life insurance policies. There are deaths where the family members had to be mandatorily screened for infectious and genetic disorders. The authors feel there is some room for accommodating these concerns within the accepted legal frame work. One suggestion is the novel idea of conducting medico-legal clinics at regular intervals to address the above mentioned issues. These clinics would be a recognized official platform where the general public could address their problems. Let us further elaborate the values of a medico-legal clinic and the possible services it can provide to the public.

1.1 Composition of a medico-legal clinic

As for any other clinic, a day in a week is allocated. In case of teaching hospitals a separate day for the University unit is advisable. The medico-legal clinic would be lead by a specialist in Forensic Medicine where the other staff include registrars in Forensic Medicine and Medical officer- Medico legal (MO-ML). In the support staff category, the medico-legal clinics would desperately need the services of a "Forensic Nurse". The Forensic Nurse is also a new entity from the Sri Lankan forensic perspective. The other minor staff can be mobilized from the Judicial Medical Officer's work force.

1.2 Some services rendered at a medico-legal clinic

- a. Issuance of medico-legal reports for insurance/civil purposes
- b. Referring family members to exclude infectious diseases, genetic disorders etc.
- c. Providing information to the relatives within legal limits considering the sensitivity of such information, both in clinical cases as well as in the autopsies
- d. Attending clinical cases with medico-legal issues referred from different wards/nearby small hospitals
- e. Finding solutions/clinico-pathologic explanations and providing feed backs pertaining to hospital deaths as long as such information is solicited by the clinicians
- f. Follow up of clinical forensic cases
- g. Maintaining appropriate registers for reference purposes

1.3 The desired outcomes of a medico-legal clinic

- a. Medico-legal services are made available to the general public with minimal hassle.

- b. A better collaboration with proper understanding among professionals involved in clinical work
- c. An accepted method of stream lining the medico-legal services

Another important link to the forensic specialist with regard to clinical forensic cases is the Forensic Nurse. This is again something new to the Sri Lankan forensic arena. A Forensic Nurse is someone who is specially trained to handle clinical forensic cases. Let us explore how a forensic nurse can be of value.

2.1 Identified duties of a forensic nurse (Sri Lankan context)

The recruited person is ideally of female gender and be an equivalent of ward sister. She would be in charge of all administrative matters and relevant clinical examinations under the supervision of the Judicial Medical Officer. She would also play a key role in administering the medico-legal clinics. The maintaining of all relevant registers would also come under the purview of the forensic nurse. She would also supervise the minor staff and be answerable to the Consultant JMO. She would be in a better position to “prepare” clinical forensic “cases” for examination (including overall psychological preparation of victims of sexual assaults for clinical examination and obtaining samples) and obtaining the so called “informed consent”.^{1, 2, 3, 4}

2.2 Necessity of a Forensic Nurse

A Forensic Nurse would further strengthen the existing system with better collaboration and support to the other stake holders in the profession. She would act as an important link in providing necessary information and required services such as in organizing institutional case conferences in physical child abuse.

2.3 Training and cadre position of a Forensic nurse

There is no currently existing training programme or an identified cadre position for a forensic nurse. The respective university departments can make available a postgraduate diploma course of one year for those who are qualified as nurses and wish to pursue a career as forensic nurse. Suitable cadre positions have

to be created in accordance with the ministry of health requirements.

The next important player in providing medico-legal service is the Forensic Pathologists’ Assistant. Here again no specific designation exists as such at present in Sri Lanka. This category of support staff needs further training and recognition. The currently existing mortuary minor staff provides exemplary services to the general public but it may go unnoticed. Let us explore the ways and means by which a pathologists’ assistant can be helpful to the medico- legal work.

Since the forensic pathologists indulge in both clinical work and autopsies the scope of the pathologists’ assistant work can be broadened. He could be of great help to the forensic pathologist in carrying out his work more precisely, meticulously and in a less cumbersome manner.^{5, 6, 7}

3.1 Duties of Forensic Pathologists’ assistant (Sri Lankan context)

- a. Assisting forensic pathologists in performing autopsies
- b. Obtaining forensic samples both in the morgue as well as in the field
- c. Maintaining chain of custody of such samples
- d. Forensic photography
- e. Blocking of tissue samples for histopathology
- f. Administrative work related to autopsies
- g. Maintaining the mortuary (mortuary management) including health and safety issues of co-workers and condition of instruments and storage and release of dead bodies
- h. Maintaining a link between the staff and already disturbed/bereaved relatives (specially in sensitive cases like SIDS)
- i. Assistance in field work (crime scene investigations)
- j. Assistance in academic matters, research, conducting practical examinations for doctors and preparation of specimens for teaching purposes
- k. Training newly recruited laborers in dissection techniques
- l. Assistance in examining clinical forensic cases.

- m. Assistance in conducting medico-legal clinics

3.2 Necessity of a Forensic Pathologists' assistant

The quality of work expected from a Forensic Pathologists' assistant is far superior to an untrained individual. They would also be supported with academic credentials to perform their work. He would be the main contact person in the mortuary with regard to administrative work and act as a link to the Forensic Pathologist. They would also maintain the relevant registers in the mortuary. Currently all this work is done by minor staff without any specific designation.

3.3 Training and cadre position of a Forensic Pathologists' assistant

A suitable training programme could be introduced by the relevant universities for those with Advanced Level qualifications. Suitable candidates could be chosen from among the already existent mortuary laborers. Those who are trained and certified would be appointed as forensic pathologists' assistant depending on the cadre positions. Formal training of mortuary attendants had been introduced in the UK more than seven decades ago.⁸ Most of the sophisticated mortuaries in the world today are managed by highly qualified pathologist's assistants and specially trained "mortuary managers".⁹

4 Review meetings of deaths at hospitals

The Forensic Pathologists are in a position to contribute to these review meetings by providing details which are worthy to note. This would be in addition to the Maternal Mortality Review meetings (MMR) and case references related to child abuse. Any post surgical death or medical deaths with unknown disease etiology needs further review. The Forensic Pathologist who had conducted the autopsy could be of immense value in providing detailed information with regard to the cause of death and other important clinico-pathologic findings. Additionally, certain data could be directly obtained from the forensic pathologists (across the country) and centrally processed for more accurate medical statistics.

CONCLUSION

Treading into new horizons beyond autopsies is the order of the day. This could only be achieved by better understanding and support among administrators and clinical staff.

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