

# 'The godmother of forensic nursing'

Early pioneered compassionate care for victims of sexual assault

LORI CULBERT

It was 1970 when rookie nurse Sheila Early treated her first sexual assault victim, a terrified young university student in Saskatoon.

"We didn't know what to do," recalled Early, who had graduated two years earlier as a registered nurse from a post-secondary program that had zero mention of sexual assault in its textbooks.

"I'm holding her hand and I'm reading from a 34-page book for what the doctor should do. And the police officer is standing in the corner of the room as far away from us as he possibly could, because he has to be there for evidence. And she's crying, and I can't do anything except hold her hand. And that is one of the first memories I have of feeling so terribly inadequate."

What that 23-year-old nurse didn't know is, two decades later, she would create B.C.'s first forensic nursing program, which would go on to be internationally recognized for giving compassionate care to thousands of sexual assault victims and provide prosecutors with key evidence for court.

Sheila Early is the godmother of forensic nursing in Canada. Her pioneering work has greatly enhanced the services for victims of crimes and the administration of justice," said Winston Sayson, a retired senior Crown prosecutor who regularly worked with Early and other forensic nurses.

From the perspective of Janet Calnan, a former student of Early's, the Surrey nurse is this country's "guru of forensic nursing."

"She's very well respected within the forensic nursing community in Canada and internationally," said Calnan, co-ordinator of Southern Vancouver Island's forensic nurse examiner program.

## LITTLE COMFORT FOR VICTIMS

Early's path from a rookie nurse in Saskatoon, where she had never heard of forensic nursing, to her ongoing advocacy for the discipline more than five decades later, has been paved with both frustration and celebration.

In the 1970s and '80s, while



Sheila Early is a nursing pioneer and the founder of B.C.'s first forensic nursing program. She has won many awards for her groundbreaking work. — ARLEN REDEKOP

working in emergency rooms in Saskatchewan, she became increasingly alarmed that busy hospitals provided little comfort for traumatized sex assault victims.

These concerns continued after Early and her family moved to B.C. in 1988, when she was hired to be the assistant head nurse at Fraser Health's Surrey Memorial Hospital.

A few years later, an RCMP officer complained that a distraught sex assault victim had to wait for several hours in the Surrey ER before a physician saw her.

The reality at the time, she said, was that doctors had to conduct sex assault exams because they were considered experts by the courts. But these terrified patients often languished a long time in public waiting rooms until the ER doctors had time to see them.

"My first thought was nothing's changed. Since 1970, when I saw the young woman in the Saskatoon emergency department, nothing's changed. So how could this



Sheila Early made the cover of Canadian Nurse magazine in May 2015.

be?" Early recalled.

She learned the ER in the

growing city of Surrey saw few sex assault victims because most local patients went to B.C. Women's Hospital in Vancouver, which had a roster of female physicians trained to handle these sensitive cases.

Early tried to bring this program to Surrey, but needed to find six female doctors and was only able to recruit three in the smaller hospital.

So she started looking for other solutions.

She discovered that in three U.S. cities, nurses were trained to treat and collect forensic evidence from sex assault victims. This wasn't happening in Canada yet, although the idea was being pursued in Toronto.

## TURNED DOWN

Early was keen to emulate it in B.C., but needed money to train nurses and open a dedicated clinic in Surrey Memorial. She asked the federal government, the provincial Ministry of Health and several other government agencies.

They all turned her down,

she said.

Undaunted, she held a town-hall meeting in June 1992 to explain the benefits of forensic nursing, and garnered the support of police, social workers and prosecutors.

Finally, the Surrey Hospitals Foundation agreed to fund a one-year pilot project.

The next step for Early, who was also the nurse educator at Surrey Memorial, was to collaborate with her counterpart at B.C. Women's — where doctors were already being trained in this work — to design a five-day instructional program.

During the inaugural session in 1993, 10 Surrey nurses became the first forensic nurse examiners in B.C.

Besides teaching some of the content, Early was also one of the 10 students who learned how to do vaginal examinations, preserve evidence for court and treat patients with compassion.

On Jan. 30, 1994, the new clinic, dubbed SANE (sexual assault nurse examiner), opened in a small room in Surrey's emergency department. It was staffed by the 10 trained nurses who continued to do their regular hospital work, but would be on call for when a sexual assault victim arrived.

Ultraviolet light was used to search for bodily fluids, which, along with other evidence, were kept meticulously clean to avoid contamination concerns in court. Patients too scared to pursue charges could just be treated to ward off pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, or have their evidence stored in case they changed their minds.

In 1994, the clinic saw 79 patients, compared to just 10 sex assault victims who came to the ER in 1992.

Local organizations began to donate bras and panties, and money for tracksuits, because the victims' clothing was often seized for evidence.

News of the program's success spread, and other hospitals asked Early to help train their nurses.

By the early 2000s, she approached BCIT about developing a formal forensic nursing program, and launched the advanced certificate in forensic health sciences in 2005.