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200 NURSE EXAMINERS

Early would go on to run the BCIT program, co-found the Canadian Forensic Nurses Association and become the first non-American president of the International Association of Forensic Nurses. She spoke in 2015 at a World Health Organization violence-prevention meeting in Geneva, and has won many awards for her groundbreaking work.

B.C., she estimates, now has 200 nurse examiners in multiple communities — nearly all of them with roots that lead back to Early, who has trained nurses in five provinces and one territory.

Calnan, who was taught by Early in 1999, said her two-decade career has been a linking of science, medicine and the law.

"It's kind of like putting a jigsaw puzzle together ... knowing what to look for and what kind of things that need to be documented," said Calnan, the Victoria-area forensic nursing boss.

"I just find it so great that you can actually take somebody in the darkest point of their lives, and help them to move forward."

Today, forensic nurses still predominantly treat women, but also men, transsexuals and children as young as 13.

And the SANE program has been renamed the Forensic Nursing Service, after it became clear the nurses' expertise could be used in more than sexual assault cases. They began to treat and collect evidence from victims of domestic abuse, child maltreatment, human trafficking, elder abuse and other cases involving foul play.

This work takes nurses out of the ER and into courtrooms. Early, alone, has testified in about 30 trials.

However, the first time prosecutor Sayson tried to introduce evidence from a forensic nurse during a sex assault trial in the early 1990s, he can distinctly remember the opposition of defence counsel.

"This is seared in my memory: The defence objects, (saying), 'She is just a nurse. She ain't no doctor,'" he recalled.

But that stereotype quickly faded, and the courts acknowledged forensic nurses' skills at documenting injuries.

"They would take the time to scrape the fingernails of the victim, which can sometimes yield DNA evidence when they fought off or



In 1994, nurses Colleen Farrow, left, Sheila Early, Kathie Alary, Sandi Schenstead, Marilyn Bergen and Pat Fennell helped establish a new clinic for sexual assault victims at Surrey's Memorial Hospital. — DAVID CLARK FILES



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Janet Calnan

scratched the accused," said Sayson, who taught students in the BCIT forensic nursing program how to testify in court.

"In one case, a nurse carefully combed the hair of the victim and, as it turns out, debris, soil, leaves and twigs came off.

"And that evidence, as benign as it may appear to be, became valuable in supporting the complainant's story that she was dragged into the bush."



Sheila Early, left, holds an ultraviolet light tool in this feature story that ran in the Surrey Leader in 2003.

'POWERFUL EVIDENCE'

Sayson can recall a forensic nurse providing such compassion to a young girl, who had been sexually assaulted by her father, that the terrified child consented to a difficult exam. It revealed sperm samples —

"powerful, indisputable scientific evidence" — that was used against the father, who had denied the incest.

"Through the feedback and training provided by Sheila and those trained by Sheila, this program has now reached a state where they



“Her pioneering work has greatly enhanced the services for victims of crimes.”

Winston Sayson

are respected, and I believe even greater respect could be extended to it," Sayson said.

Sexual assaults have increased in cities like Vancouver and Victoria, but Early knows forensic nursing has played an important role in reducing some of the trauma faced by those victims.

"I think of every patient that we keep from suicide attempts, from suffering through post-traumatic stress disorder, from mental health issues, from ongoing physical

complications, as wins," she said.

Now in her 70s, Early is a consultant who helps to educate nurse examiners and assist with legal cases.

She continues to lobby, as well, for forensic nursing to become part of undergraduate curriculums. For now, nurses interested in forensics must attend additional training after they graduate, such as through the BCIT program created by Early.

Calnan believes demand for their profession will only grow.

"Unfortunately, our society has become more violent," she said. "There's a potential to have forensic nurses on staff in every emergency department across Canada."

Early is frustrated this hasn't happened already. In the meantime, though, she can take solace that since she treated her first sex assault victim in 1970, forensic nursing — a profession she helped bring to Canada — has now spread across the country.

"That's how I have to benchmark it, and not be so impatient," she said, adding: "There are now nurse examiner programs in every province, except Quebec."

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