The Patient’s Perspective
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Center for Community Solutions
Healing and Preventing Sexual Assault and Relationship Violence
Who We Are...

- Provide prevention and intervention services to victims of sexual assault and relationship violence.

- Non-profit that serves over 30,000 men, women and children on an annual basis.

- Established in 1969 on the campus of SDSU as a women's resource center.

- Began receiving Rape Crisis Center funding in 1984

- Changed our name in 1995 to be more inclusive of the needs of the community.
Locations...

Multiple locations throughout San Diego with three offices located in:

- Coastal Office, Pacific Beach
- East County Office, La Mesa
- North County Office, Escondido
CCS Services

- Advocacy Services
  - Sexual Assault Victim Advocacy Services provides crisis intervention to 1,000 – 1,200 survivors annually
- Shelter Services
- Counseling Services
- Legal Services
- Prevention and Education Services
- Hotline
Providing the Patient/Victim/Survivor/Client’s Perspective

- Thank you.
- But this is a tall order...

I am here as a symbol. By requesting an advocate come and speak at a symposium of this sort, by requesting that the advocate give the ‘patient’s perspective’, IAFN is formally declaring how important it is that amongst the discussion on legal matters and technique, we all remember that our decisions impact real people. And I think that’s awesome. I’m OK with being a symbol.

Now I know you all became nurses so that you could hurt people, right? I know that’s why Law Enforcement officers choose to go into Law Enforcement. And because of your intense desire to create more pain in the world, you decided to become forensic nurses?
No, you’re compassionate, naturally. So as an advocate I don’t have to try very hard to give you the patient’s perspective, because many of you, in coming into contact with survivor’s regularly, already have an idea.

But as an advocate we do have an awesome opportunity to simply be able to sit with a survivor, validate their feelings and concerns, and not have to be objective about a darn thing. You all have to act as scientists, we get to avoid that.

It is a tall order representing the patient’s perspective, because there are as many perspective’s as there are victims of sexual assault in this world. And each Survivor is going to, rightfully, have a different perspective on:
reporting the assault
the forensic exam
photography at the exam
etc.
Informal Survey

- Non-scientific
- Picked a few survivors who felt comfortable talking with either myself or their advocates about the photography
- Small sample:
  - 5 emails + 5 other informal discussions over the past few months
  (Although if 19 is enough for White and Dumont to publish...)

All women, between 25 and 65, white and latina.
The entire forensic exam is terribly difficult.

- We all do what we can to work within the system, to make it as good as it can be. However, the forensic exam is difficult and can be re-traumatizing.
- Not to be taken personally – it has nothing to do with you. But you do have power to lessen the re-traumatization.

The fact that the forensic exam sucks, has nothing to do with you. Or me, the advocate. It has to do with the fact that someone sexually violated another human being. And because of that, a nurse is now placing latex gloves, swabs and cameras in parts of the body that were just violated. You cannot take it personally. But you can make a huge difference in just how difficult the exam is for the survivor, by how you treat the survivor.

I hear a lot more about the negative effects of feeling coerced into the anal exam than about photography.
“The entire experience is surreal”

- Nothing about the exam is normal, it is all new, and survivors don’t usually understand what is happening.

- The forensic exam is NOT similar to a normal annual pelvic exam and pap smear.

- Photography is an additional factor to an already difficult exam.

Multiple survivors
Trust In Medical Professionals: Security

- Most had never before questioned the photography part of the exam, because it was assumed to just be part of it all. They expected photography as a standard way of collecting evidence.

- Trusted the nurses and law enforcement to keep the photographs protected, secure and never worried about whether the photographs were being kept safe.
 Desire to “Get Him”

- If a Survivor has overcome all the barriers to reporting, and has consented to a forensic exam, the survivor wants to ‘get him’

- Wanted to do whatever it took to successfully prosecute, and felt proud to have done all they could. Photography was part of that.

If that includes repeating yet again what happened; peeing in a cup; sitting naked with two strangers; being poked, prodded and swabbed in her most intimate areas; then so be it. That also includes photography.
The Forensic Exam Can Be Validating

- Self-Blame, Self-Doubt and Victim-Blaming can all negatively impact a Survivor’s healing after sexual trauma.

- The forensic exam can validate the Survivor and push against victim-blaming and self-blame.

- The photographs can also help with this. One survivor had her advocate take photos with her cell phone camera.
  - “I had [the Advocate] take a photo of me on my cell phone. I could feel the damage, just had not seen it. It is a tough dose of reality, but it did help...I already knew I was a wreck and the pictures would reflect that trauma”

We see it in the media all the time, blaming victims of sexual trauma for the assault. The forensic exam, the nurse, the law enforcement officer and the advocate each have power to lay blame where it belongs, in the hands of the perpetrator.
A Different Perspective

• I said: representing the patient’s perspective is a tall order...

• A couple survivors felt that the photography was by far the worst part of the exam.

• Photographs flashing in a Survivor’s peripheral vision are still triggering to this day (five years after she was sexually assaulted).
What can you do, to make it easier?
Explain, Validate, Explain Some More

- Explain
  - Explain your actions, allowing the survivor to consent to EACH and EVERY action
    - Photograph by photograph
    - Sample by Sample

- Validate
  - Validate the survivors thoughts, feelings, and concerns.
  - Do not forget, you are in a position of tremendous power.
Remember...

- The Survivor will never forget this exam, and will likely associate it as part of the extremely traumatic experience of being sexually assaulted.
- How well you explain the various parts of the exam, and validate the survivors feelings and concerns, can make a huge difference in how the survivor perceives the exam long after the case has been closed.
- The photography part of the exam is particularly odd and potentially re-traumatizing, but so is the entire forensic exam.
- Every survivor is different, and there is no one way to respond to trauma.
Thank You
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