

# EDITORIAL

## **EXTENDING SERVICES BEYOND A TRADITIONAL FRAME : THE ROLE OF A UNIVERSITY FORENSIC DEPARTMENT**

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This paper identifies the role of a University Forensic Department in extending its services beyond a traditional frame. The arguments in favour of this thesis are formulated focussing the Department of Forensic Medicine at University of Peradeniya. It is reasonably foreseen that any other university department could contemplate in the same lines if they so choose.

A university academic plays a main role in the society and he has multiple functions which include, but is not limited to teaching and training, research and writing, clinical function, curriculum development and revision, conduct examinations, administrative functions, addressing public seminars, consultancies, dissemination of knowledge and publishing, student counselling, maintain student discipline, university welfare appear as expert witnesses to court and so on. It is not the intention of this article to elaborate on the role of the university academic but to outline the functions of a university forensic unit so that the aim of this topic is articulated accordingly into the discussion.

A university forensic unit in Sri Lanka traditionally engages in teaching (both medical undergraduates and postgraduates), research and in provision of medico-legal service function. These three components are important integral and essential components that cannot be compromised in a university forensic unit. However there are opportunities scope and an obligation for a university department to extend the services beyond these limits.

A University Forensic department is different from that of a hospital judicial

medical office in many respects including but not limited to university unit's obligation to generate new knowledge, teach and train, disseminate knowledge, research and award, degrees and qualifications.

The department of Forensic Medicine extends its expertise and services to many other faculties including the Dental faculty (in teaching forensic dentistry and clinical Ethics), to the Faculty of Allied Health, and to the Faculty of Arts. In addition, the department extends its services to other university forensic units in conducting teaching and examinations.

The department started a Diploma course in forensic medicine for lawyers and judges. This was necessary as the officers of the courts require to understand the medico-legal report and medical evidence in order to apply them in their legal case. According to the feed-back received, this course was immensely useful to legal practitioners in their day today work.

The academic staff of the department are frequently invited as resource people for many medico-legal seminars and workshops. This enables the department to reach a focus group in disseminating their expertise. Further engaging with media in discussing medico-legal issues paves the way to reach a wider audience.

At the time when I presented and defended the Diploma course in Forensic Medicine for Lawyers and Judges at the University senate, the members of the senate requested me to expand this diploma course not limiting only to medical and legal practitioners. Having considered this I have proposed to the department that at least a

certificate course in forensic medicine and science should be offered for those who are interested. These include coroners police officers, prison officers, media personal, sociologists and criminologists. Also students of other faculties could follow this course and credit it to their degree, if and when the university opens up transfer of credits from different faculties or it could even extend to other university students face to face or via distant mode. The aim of this certificate course is to provide basic knowledge in forensics to those who are interested. This will provide an opportunity for the interested public to upgrade their knowledge in an area they like for any reason including their personal interests. One ought not to fear as this basic course will not provide any authenticity to practice any discipline of forensics.

A training program and a series of seminars on DNA in forensic practice was conducted through the department for police, coroners, lawyers, medical officers and scientists etc. These series were also very popular and participants from many different places from Sri Lanka attended.

Several seminars on medical ethics were successfully conducted on invitation for numerous audiences including medical officers, dental officers, academics, students, allied health workers, philosophers general public etc.

Another idea that came to my mind was to have a permanent exhibition centre for forensics at the department which will be open for public. This was proposed to the department and the department agreed on principle. I am sure this will be a success as the forensic stall – “Justice through Medicine” (I had the opportunity to chair the forensic committee of the exhibition) won a prize at the last medical exhibition that brought many thousands of people to come and enjoy the different aspects of forensic practice. The proposed venue would be the existing forensic medicine department at Peradeniya when we move to the new building.

Many lawyers and judges who are in rural areas find it difficult to travel to Peradeniya for the diploma course in forensic medicine. Considering this difficulty I proposed to the department that we can provide extension courses such as the Diploma in forensic Medicine course and the certificate course “on line”. The philosophy is that when it is difficult for the participant to travel, we the faculty visit them online! With my experience abroad in teaching in a prestigious medical school and having had training in face to face, online and distance learning, we would be able to offer a unique course in forensics which both undergraduates ( if they wish to ) and others could benefit. This requires additional preparing, computer professionals moodle or blackboard interfaces and commitment.

At the moment we have adequate learning materials, details of curriculum and a self learning package for undergraduate medical students in our departmental web which include learning materials and self evaluation of the subject. This helps student’s active learning.

The next is to engage in advanced multi disciplinary research beyond mere case reports writing. This requires team work, collaboration, training, research and commitment.

Now that the department is having service function extents to all seven days of the week at Peradeniya teaching hospital, with the help of the clinical staff in the department it is possible to expand the postgraduate teaching. In the future with the opening of the proposed human identification unit in the department along with a DNA laboratory which will serve at least the central province.

As forensic pathology is relatively well developed, there is an obligation by university forensic departments to initiate and develop other forensic specialities, such as forensic sciences. It is a requirement that all parallel forensic sciences develop simultaneously to administer justice. It is

my view that a university forensic unit engages personnel from relevant other forensic specialities also in order to approach a medico-legal case as a team. This will not only facilitate team approach in solving a medico-legal issue but also encourage collaborating research in forensics and also help to develop forensic degrees and courses in all forensic disciplines through the university forensic unit. A forensic lawyer too will be an added asset to a university forensic department. These are existing voids in our system which need urgent attention. However, this expansion needs to be done NOT compromising quality and/or quantity of undergraduate and postgraduate medical teaching. With this proposed model it is not only possible to approach a medico-legal case as a team but also provide a multi-faceted, multi-specialized research environment at the university. This approach de-compartmentalizes forensic specialities and converge different experts to a common goal in a common ground. In this way we can have one forensic unit in a

university with multiple experts belonging to different areas of specialities serving a common goal which is education and administration of justice as a team. Also this model helps universities to conduct several forensic degree courses in different specialities from one department of study apart from solving a medico-legal problem as a team in the same venue. This provides a unique environment to students from all areas of forensic specialties and demonstrate a team environment. A unique example of this model exists in the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine in Australia and in Adelaide Forensic Unit.

These are some of the ways we can extend our services beyond traditional frame work and engage public and educate the community for which we need man power, resources commitment and a positive attitude. These are all possible extra endeavours beyond the routine service function teaching and research commitments of a forensic department.