

EMPOWERING “SIGNIFICANT OTHERS” IN FORENSIC MEDICAL PRACTICE IN SRI LANKA

Induwara Gooneratne

*Senior Lecturer, Department of Forensic Medicine
Faculty of Medicine, University of Peradeniya*

Forensic Medical Practice is undoubtedly teamwork and involves several important members. Forensic Pathologists, post mortem assistants, laboratory technicians are some key personal in the local set up. In addition to these categories, forensic anthropologists, forensic odontologists, forensic scientists and police involve in medico legal work when required. The Inquirer in to Sudden Deaths is the team leader when it comes to an inquest where an order is issued for an autopsy report, if required. Finally the court, lawyers and relatives get involved in matters connected to the administration of the law.

Medical and dental officers along with other forensic scientists have the opportunity to pursue local and foreign training on their job. However the significant others¹, other than these categories (medical officers, dental surgeons and scientists) unfortunately lack the opportunities for further training in their role in forensic practice. This situation not only reduces the quality of team work and their specific roles in forensic practice but also significantly reduces their self esteem and motivation. The most affected and neglected members of the forensic team in Sri Lanka in respect to formal training are the post mortem labourers and laboratory assistants.

A research carried out by the author among “significant others” in forensic practice in regard to inter alia their job satisfaction, training needs, knowledge and perceptions in regard to medico-legal work, revealed that their knowledge attitude and practices in regard to safe autopsy practice, infection control and possible occupational hazards were not satisfactory. None of them has received any formal or non formal training in any aspect to their job. This situation warranted me to organize a training workshop on “safe autopsy practice” for post mortem labourers and other non clinical staff who involve in medico-legal

work. An invitation was extended to the central province staff who involve in medico-legal work and the central province Director of Health Services permitted all post mortem staff in hospitals to attend this workshop.

The participants enjoyed the work shop. There was a pre test in regard to basic knowledge on safe autopsy and a post test that was conducted after the workshop. These two tests revealed that the participants have significantly improved their knowledge and attitude in regard to safe autopsy. The participants were enthusiastic and actively involved in the training program.

The workshop included sessions on safe autopsy procedure, infection control, preventing occupational hazards and ethics and professionalism. The resource persons were from the department of microbiology and the department of forensic medicine faculty of medicine university of Peradeniya.

By analysing the comments the participants made orally at the end of the session and in there written feedback, it is evident that they have never had any training in regard to their work or related to safe autopsy practice. Having empirical scientific evidence to show that there is a risk of cross infections in post mortem handling, it was surprising to note that these participants have never had any such training.

The author believes that these categories of ‘significant others’ in forensic work in Sri Lanka should be given adequate recognition, training and attention. Such a training and formal recognition of their work not only improve their self esteem but also will up lift work quality, safety and reduce cross infections.

¹Significant others in forensic practice include postmortem labourers, assistants, lab technicians etc.