

How to Become a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE)

A Guide for Nurses Interested in Forensic Nursing

Becoming a SANE: A Journey Worth Taking

One of the questions I hear most often is:

"How do I become a SANE?"

The answer is actually much simpler than most people think.

When people hear the title *Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner*, they often picture someone who has done this work for years—someone who never gets nervous and always knows exactly what to do.

The truth is, every forensic nurse started exactly where you are today.

No one begins this career knowing how to perform a forensic examination, collect evidence, document injuries, testify in court, or care for patients experiencing one of the most traumatic moments of their lives.

Those are skills that are learned through education, practice, mentorship, and experience.

If you have compassion, curiosity, and a desire to make a difference, you already possess the most important qualities.

Step 1: Become a Registered Nurse

Every SANE begins as a licensed Registered Nurse.

It doesn't matter whether your background is in:

- Emergency Nursing
- Critical Care
- Labor & Delivery

- Pediatrics
- Medical-Surgical
- Corrections
- Family Practice
- Community Health

Forensic nursing builds upon your existing nursing skills.

Your greatest asset is not your specialty—it is your ability to care for people during difficult moments.

Step 2: Complete a 40-Hour Didactic Course

This course provides the educational foundation for forensic nursing.

Topics typically include:

- Trauma-informed patient care
- Patient autonomy and informed consent
- Medical-forensic documentation
- Evidence collection
- DNA preservation
- Photography
- Injury identification
- Pregnancy and STI prevention
- Drug-facilitated sexual assault
- Strangulation assessment
- Pediatric considerations
- Court testimony
- Human trafficking
- Collaboration with advocates, law enforcement, and multidisciplinary teams

This course teaches the **"why"** behind everything we do.

Step 3: Attend a Clinical Skills Lab

Knowledge is important—but confidence comes from practice.

A Clinical Skills Lab allows you to safely develop hands-on skills before caring for patients independently.

You will practice:

- Medical forensic examinations
- Evidence collection
- Speculum examinations
- Photography techniques
- Documentation
- Alternate light source use
- Packaging evidence
- Chain of custody
- Pelvic anatomy
- Anal/rectal examinations
- Mock patient scenarios

This is where classroom knowledge begins to become clinical confidence.

Step 4: Clinical Orientation and Mentorship

Graduating from a course does **not** mean you're expected to work independently.

Every new forensic nurse deserves mentorship.

During orientation you will:

- Shadow experienced SANEs
- Perform examinations with a preceptor
- Practice documentation
- Develop photography skills
- Learn evidence management
- Participate in quality assurance and peer review
- Build confidence one patient at a time

Every examination becomes another opportunity to learn.

Even experienced SANEs continue learning throughout their careers.

Step 5: Practice Independently

Once competency has been demonstrated, you'll begin caring for patients independently while continuing to receive support from your forensic nursing team.

No two patients are exactly alike.

Every case strengthens your assessment skills, clinical judgment, documentation, and confidence.

Step 6: National Certification

National certification is a professional goal—not the starting point.

After gaining experience, nurses may choose to pursue certification through the International Association of Forensic Nurses (IAFN).

Certification demonstrates advanced knowledge and commitment to excellence in forensic nursing.

Learning never stops.

Remember Why We Do This

Many people think being a SANE is about collecting evidence.

It isn't.

Evidence matters.

Documentation matters.

Photography matters.

But patients rarely remember those details.

They remember something much more important.

They remember how you made them feel.

Did someone believe them?

Did someone listen without judgment?

Did someone give them choices when they felt like they had none?

Did someone treat them with dignity?

That is what forensic nursing is truly about.

The medical forensic examination is simply the vehicle that allows us to provide compassionate, trauma-informed care while preserving options for the patient's future.

We Never Work Alone

Forensic nursing is built on collaboration.

We routinely work alongside:

- Emergency Department providers
- Victim advocates
- Law enforcement
- Prosecutors
- Child Protection Services
- Social workers
- Mental health professionals
- Crime laboratories
- Sexual Assault Response Teams (SART)
- Multidisciplinary Teams (MDT)

Every professional has an important role.

The forensic nurse serves as the medical expert while protecting patient autonomy and providing objective, evidence-based care.

Could This Be Your Calling?

Ask yourself:

- Do I enjoy helping people during difficult moments?
- Am I detail-oriented?
- Can I remain objective while showing compassion?
- Do I enjoy lifelong learning?
- Do I believe every patient deserves dignity and respect?

If you answered "yes," forensic nursing may be the right path for you.

My Final Thought

I'll leave you with this.

Patients may never remember every medication you gave them.

They may never remember every question you asked.

But they will remember how you made them feel during one of the hardest moments of their lives.

As forensic nurses, we have the privilege of helping patients regain control, preserve their choices, and begin healing.

If that purpose speaks to you, I encourage you to take the first step.

Someone once mentored us.

Now it's our turn to mentor the next generation.

Thank you.