

Marion Star (Marion, OH)

January 30, 2005 Sunday

SANE Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners Always on Call

MARION – After being sexually assaulted, a victim has a place to go in Marion for comfort and, potentially, for justice.

Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners at Marion General Hospital are available not only to comfort a victim but also to offer evidence and testimony if the case goes to trial. Nurses also check for sexually transmitted diseases and can make referrals to doctors. They have a magnifying camera – a colposcope – that can detect minute scratches on the skin.

SANE offers exams to children and adults. SANE co-coordinator Sara Baldosser said she is especially gentle with children. The examination room chair is covered with stuffed animals.

Baldosser said children recover from a traumatic situation more quickly than an adult and often play games and smile like any other child. Darlene Schoonard, SANE co-coordinator, agreed.

“Many times it’s a loved one who has done that and they love them and trust them and they don’t realize that it’s wrong, but it is,” Schoonard said.

Schoonard said she remembers one time when her testimony helped a little girl. She recalled the girl’s reaction before a court proceeding.

“I had a little girl come across the room and hug me,” she said. “That’s the biggest reward I could get because I was going to testify for her.”

The number of cases doubled in 2004, the year SANE started taking pediatric patients - those age 12 and younger. In 2003, Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners had 52 cases. In 2004, they had 103 cases.

According to a SANE myth-buster handout, children may lie when it comes to sexual abuse; however, they are more likely to deny the abuse than to invent it. Children rarely tell at all, according to the handout.

“We just tell their parents the most supportive thing they can do is believe their child,” Baldosser said.

Before the program came to Marion in 2000, residents had to go to Mansfield or Columbus for a pediatric forensic examination. Forensic simply means “pertaining to the law,” according to a

pamphlet from the New Jersey-based International Association of Forensic Nurses, with whom SANE is affiliated.

Forensics involves the collection of DNA and other evidence.

When SANE started training nurses in forensic examinations in 1996, a local victims' access to help came home. Exams were available prior to that, but through an emergency room physician rather than an expert in sexual assault cases. Those in need of an exam in surrounding counties, such as Delaware or Wyandot counties, are often referred to SANE. There were 145 reported rape cases, according to Patrol Officer Electa Foster of the Marion City Police Department.

"This is not something that you can close your eyes to that doesn't exist," said Pam Thomas-Groves, who began the program. "It's real."

The hospital has eight trained SANE nurses, but only two are full-time – co-coordinators Baldosser and Schoonard. The rest are part-time SANEs who do other nursing work. Only three SANEs are fully trained in examining pediatrics, and all must be an adult SANE first.

They must do 24 exams with a physician as well as attend 80 hours of medical lectures on adult, adolescent and pediatric patients. SANEs go to the Well Baby Clinic on Center Street to understand how a regular exam would go before they begin exams on youths who have been sexually abused.

Baldosser said many nurses go through the training but cannot handle the work. Yet, despite the training, trials and limited staffing, there's always someone on call.

"We may get a call in the middle of the night telling us we have a case scheduled," Baldosser said.

A SANE can be at the hospital within an hour and their entire time is devoted to that patient. She said they may perform as many as three examinations in one day.

Before SANE started, victims often called Turning Point, whose representatives had to tell adult victims to receive a doctor's exam at the emergency room. While domestic violence and sexual assault sometimes overlap, Turning Point executive director Paula Roller said she's glad to send victims to a specialist for aid.

"It's awesome because imagine if you were a victim," Roller said of SANE. "It all starts right there with that program and evidence collection."

Roller said she thinks the group is instrumental in helping with court cases when it comes to testimony and evidence collection.

SANE has united local groups in terms of serving sexual assault victims from the moment an incident occurs right up to the final court date in their case, said Rhonda G. Burggraf, assistant prosecutor at the Marion County Prosecutor's Office.

Burggraf said that SANE is key not only because of important evidence collection for a case but also because often there are no visible signs of injury following a sexual assault. She said a forensic nurse's testimony stating that no injuries are typical in a rape case can be crucial.

"The female body is meant to accept items being inserted into it without causing injury," Burggraf said. "Just because that happened without injury does not mean sexual assault didn't occur."

Yet, SANEs aren't victims advocates and they have done forensic exams on suspects.

"SANEs are advocates of the truth," said Thomas-Groves, also the Marion General emergency room nursing manager. "They do not represent prosecution or defense."

She said they do provide comfort to victims, especially those who are acute or come in within 72 hours. There is also some short term intervention such as counseling available. Yet, no one is turned away, and no one's honesty is questioned when they come in for an exam.

"To us, if they come in and say they've been sexually assaulted, they've been sexually assaulted," Baldosser said.

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Where to Go for Help in Marion

- All who are in immediate danger must call 9-1-1.
- For an exam, go to Marion General Hospital, 1000 McKinley Park Drive, in the emergency wing, and visit the Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners. A SANE is on call 24 hours a day. Call the MGH emergency room at 740-383-8500 and ask for a SANE.
- For those who know someone who has been sexually assaulted, and want less immediate help call the SANE business line at 740-383-8677.
- Call the 24-hour Turning Point crisis line at 800-232-6505, or the business line at 740-382-8988 or try their Web site at www.turningpoint6.com. They currently have no rooms for men.
- The Marion Homeless Shelter is located at 365 E. Fairground St. Their number is 740-382-9600.
- At the Marion County Prosecutor's Office, Rhonda G. Burggraf takes on many of the sexual assault cases in town. Gwen Chestnut is the victim advocate at the prosecutor's office. To reach Burggraf and Chestnut, call 740-223-4290.
- Call the Marion Victim Assistance Program at 740-387-4401 or their emergency number, Careline, at 740-383-2273.

- Call Marion County Children’s Services at 740-389-2317.
- Call the AIDS Task Force at 740-382-0559 for free and confidential testing.
- Call the Marion City Police Department at 740-387-2525 and ask for Patrol Officer Electa Foster, who is trained in victims advocacy. Other officers have experienced similar training.
- Call the Marion County Sheriff’s Office at 740-382-8244 or 800-241-8244.
- Call the Marion Area Counseling Center at 740-387-5210.
- Call the Enrichment Center, also for counseling, at 740-383-7840.

Sexual Assault Statistics

- Between 1 in 4 and 1 in 5 women experience rape or attempted rape during their college years.
- Females between the age of 12 to 24 are at the greatest risk of sexual assault.
- Men perpetrate the majority of these acts.
- Most perpetrators know their victims.
- Fewer than half of all rapes are reported to the police.

Source: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control

Assaults in Marion

- There were 137 sex offense investigations in Marion in 2004, an increase of 38 more than in 2003.
- There were 145 reported sexual assault victims in 2004 and 110 reported victims in 2003.

Source: Patrol Officer Electa Foster of the Marion City Police Department

Assaults in the Nation

- The chances of being a victim of sexual assault in one’s lifetime is 1 in 8 for females and 1 in 10 for males.
- Before the age of 18, 1 in 4 females and 1 in 7 males will be a victim of sexual assault.

Source: Marion County Prosecutor’s Office

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