

A Quality-Assured Medico-Legal Service Through Human Resource Management in the Medico-Legal Unit of Sri Lanka.


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Abstract

A specialist in forensic medicine has a dual role in Sri Lanka. These are conducting autopsies on death and the medico-legal examination of living cases of physical and sexual assault, poisoning or alcohol intoxication, etc. To deliver a quality-assured forensic service human resources play a pivotal role. The present workforce of a medico-legal unit consists of a specialist in forensic medicine, a medical officer medico-legal, a development officer, a morgue assistant, and a female healthcare assistant. Due to the lack of necessary professional skills among non-medical staff members and the lack of proper job descriptions for the non-medical staff members some pivotal functions in the medico-legal unit are handled by the less qualified staff members. We suggest that the relevant professional bodies in collaboration with ministries, develop standardized job descriptions and allocation of roles for non-medical staff members across the medico-legal units in the country so that the institutions and all the stakeholders adhere to the duties specified to improve the desired quality of the medico-legal unit.

Keywords: Proper job descriptions, medico-legal unit, development officer, morgue assistant, management assistant, quality assured forensic service, health care assistant, forensic nurse

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Introduction

A Specialist in forensic medicine (SFM) in Sri Lanka has a dual role. These are investigations into unexpected, violent or unnatural deaths, as well as examinations of physical and sexual assault, poisoning, alcohol intoxication, etc.[1] The Medico-legal unit (MLU) of Sri Lanka is headed by a clinical and administrative SFM. The hospital director serves as the administrator of the hospital. However, the medico-legal functions are provided independently. Human resources are essential for delivering a high-quality forensic service. The current staff members of an MLU include an SFM, Medical Officer-Medico-Legal (MO-ML), Development officer (DO), morgue assistants, and a female healthcare assistant.

Objectives

The objectives were

1. To identify the current roles of non-medical staff in Sri Lanka's MLU and
2. to propose reforms for quality assurance in forensic services.

Discussion

In 1994, the Ministry of Health (MoH) issued a circular (No. 1017) regarding the development of medico-legal services in Sri Lanka.[2] The categories of staff members included in the Medico-legal unit (MLU) with a Specialist in forensic medicine (SFM) are listed as Medical officer, Medico-legal (MO-ML), a separate Medical laboratory technologist from the hospital laboratory allocated for forensic histopathology, an English steno typist, a clerk, a female attendant, two male labourers, and mortuary attendants. Currently, the Ministry of Health Sri Lanka does not have any job categories for clerks or steno typists. The job category of clerk in Sri Lanka has been replaced by the Management assistant (MA), which now requires successful completion of the Advanced Level Examination conducted by the Department of Examination as an educational qualification. The duties of MA are outlined in the Service Minute of the Public Management Assistant, published in the Extraordinary Gazette of Sri Lanka. However, currently, MA positions or steno typists are not assigned to the MLUs. The ability to take dictation and type Medico-legal reports (MLR) is crucial for a stenographer, making shorthand a valuable skill.

Currently, even though some MLUs of tertiary care hospitals are allocated a Development officer (DO), a DO does not have sufficient typing skills or shorthand abilities. In cases of child sexual abuse, the child's account is crucial. The child's history is recorded in their language in the MLR. The lack of a professional typist places an extra burden on the SFM causing delays in sending reports to the court of law. However, some MLUs in the peripheral regions are not even allocated a DO.

A Bachelor's degree from a recognized Sri Lankan university is required as an educational qualification to become a DO.[4] Currently, there is no standardized duty list without uniform allocation of duties for DOs in MLU across the country. Although the MLUs provide services 365 days a year, the DO has duty time on weekdays with weekends off work. Thus those duties are covered by the Health care assistant (HCA).

There is no separate job category for morgue assistants in MoH, Sri Lanka, unlike other developed countries. The morgue assistant is an HCA who receives basic in-service training following allocation to an MLU. The successful completion of the Ordinary Level examination conducted by the Department of Examination is the educational qualification for HCA. In developed countries, morgue assistants are qualified professionals who not only perform routine work but also handle legally important documentation. [5]

The MoH has issued a circular that contains a job description for HCA.[6] The specific and medico legally important duties that are currently performed by HCA in the MLU are not included in their job description. This is a job description for a general hospital setting.[6] However, they are required to perform additional duties specific to their allocated unit, even if they are not included in their job description as per the circular.

The following are the duties currently performed by HCA in MLU, grouped for clarity:

Table 1. Current duties done by health care assistant

A	Duties done by HCA in the MLU
1	As a receptionist, I handle clients' inquiries and concerns about our services.
2	Compiles and maintains the registers in a MLU.
3	Cleans the medico-legal unit
4	Organizes and stores medico-legal documents of the SFM for easy reference keeping.
5	Maintains equipment inventory of MLU
6	Maintains the inventory of office supplies and manages office supplies.
B	Duties done by HCA during autopsy

7	Assists the forensic pathologist during the autopsy
8	Cleans and prepares the dead body, cleans and sets out the necessary equipment for the autopsy, cleans the morgue and autopsy equipment following the autopsy
9	Transports the dead body to the morgues, and stores bodies in morgue coolers
10	Handles and transports post mortem samples
11	Takes photographs of the deceased.
12	Seals the sample bottle with a wax seal to maintain the chain of custody under the supervision of the SFM or MO/ML.
13	Releases of a dead body to the legal next of kin after necessary documentation.
C	Duties done by HCA in medico-legal examination of examinees.
14	The documentation and registering of medico-legal examination of examinees.
15	Assists the SFM and MO/ML during the ward rounds in the clinical examination of patients.
16	Takes over MLEF from the police and hands over the completed MLEFs to the police after documentation in the register.
17	HAS is the chaperone for the examination of patients/examinees
18	Handles and maintains custody of the clinical samples.
D	Duties done by HCA in taking over the summons from the court of law and mail
19	Sorts the mail and distributes them to the relevant doctors.
20	Receives the summons in a separate register, sorts, and distributes to the relevant doctor.
21	Delivers the MLR by hand or mails it to the relevant courts of law.
22	Manages invoices and follows up on outstanding payments for postage.

HCA = Health Care Assistant, SFM,= Specialist in forensic medicine, MO/M = Medical Officer, Medico-Legal, MLEF = Medico-legal examination form=

Considering the above duties of the HCA in MLU, most of the duties performed by an HCA are similar to those of an office clerk, except for tasks related to autopsy and clinical examination. [7] A clerk is responsible for performing various clerical and administrative duties within an organization.

The HCAs are not trained specifically by professionals on these skills that are needed to perform such duties. Proficiency in computer software including word processing, spreadsheets, data entry, and accounting, touch typing and minute-taking skills, excellent verbal and written communication skills to be able to correspond on behalf of the unit, excellent interpersonal and customer service skills, multitasking skills are some of them. However, with experience, HCAs were able to perform these duties to an acceptable level.

In a clinic or hospital ward, initial documentation, register maintenance, and patient education are performed by a nursing officer (NO). The basic qualification for nurses is either a Diploma in Nursing or a Bachelor of Nursing.

The sister in charge of the ward is responsible for maintaining inventory and handling drugs and surgical supplies though the HCA does it in the MLU.

From the withdrawal of a blood sample to its arrival at the laboratory, a NO in a ward coordinates and manages the process. The doctor in the ward only requests the test. In the MLU, the SFM is responsible for ensuring safety as there is no proper authority. In developed countries, there is a specialized position known as a forensic nurse who is responsible for securing forensic samples. [8] In Sri Lanka, a forensic pathologist had their license revoked due to the loss of forensic samples in a high-profile case.[9] This highlights the importance of providing a clear job description to the DO or a NO, with a special emphasis on the authority of the forensic sample.

Considering all the above additional supervising the work of these staff members has become a responsibility for the SFM.

The National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) accreditation applies to MLU, not individual practitioners with the standards emphasizing policies and procedures. NAME accreditation indicates that the MLU provides an adequate environment for a forensic pathologist in which to practice his or her profession and provides reasonable assurances that the office serves its jurisdiction well. [10]

System improvements in District General Hospital, Matale

After identifying the learning and resource needs, we prepared duty lists for all staff members that are compatible with the objectives of the MLU and established directional staff development for the Development officer (DO) and Health care assistant (HCA). Administrative clearance was obtained from the Director of the Hospital.

The duties of the clerk/management assistant, previously performed by HCA, were assigned to the DO.

The Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) at the Institute of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology (IFMT), Colombo were modified with the permission of the Chief SFP of IFMT, Colombo

with the inclusion of Sinhalese translations to SOPs for cleaning the morgue, identifying the deceased, and releasing the body after the autopsy, etc.

Conclusion and recommendations

It is essential that the professional bodies of Sri Lanka, in collaboration with the relevant Ministries, develop standardized job descriptions and allocation of roles for non-medical staff members across medico-legal units facilities in the country so that the institutions and all the stakeholders adhere to the duties specified to improve the desired quality of the medico-legal unit.

We recommend appointing an authorized officer, such as a Nursing Officer, Development Officer, or Medical Officer-Medico-Legal, to the medico-legal unit to handle forensic samples.

We also recommend proper training of nonmedical staff members with an appropriate curriculum.

Disclosure statement

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