



Practice Perspectives

Building a Virtual Community of Practice for Novice and Advanced Forensic Nurses: Fostering Knowledge Exchange and Professional Growth

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Abstract

This article addresses the contemporary issue of establishing a virtual Community of Practice (CoP) for novice and advanced forensic nurses, emphasizing knowledge exchange and professional growth. The central issue identified is the need for a structured and supportive environment for forensic nurses to continuously develop their skills and share expertise. Historical factors, such as the evolution of the CoP concept from social learning research in the 1980s, demonstrate the longstanding value of collaborative professional development. Social factors highlight the unique and diverse skill set required in forensic nursing and the challenges of professional isolation. Political factors include legislative changes and policy fragmentation that impact the availability of resources and support for forensic nursing practices. Economic factors underscore the inadequate funding allocations that limit forensic nurses' ability to provide essential services and pursue continuous professional development. The potential impacts of CoPs on individual nurses, forensic nursing organizations, and society are explored. Recommendations for developing a robust virtual CoP are provided, emphasizing mentorship, continuous learning, inclusivity, and regular evaluation, incorporating insights from stakeholders to ensure effectiveness and sustainability.

Keywords: sexual assault nurse examiner, forensic nursing, community of practice (CoP), engagement, virtual learning community

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Issue Identification

Communities of Practice (CoP) are collaborative groups where individuals with shared professional interests engage in ongoing knowledge exchange and skill development (Tokolahi et al., 2024; Wenger, 2009; Wenger-Trayner & Wegner-Trayner, 2015). In healthcare, CoPs can reduce professional isolation, enhance knowledge translation, and improve clinical outcomes (Shaw et al., 2022; Wenger, 2009). Forensic nursing, a field that bridges clinical care and the legal system, faces challenges such as professional isolation, fragmented resources, and inconsistent mentorship. CoPs offer a structured approach to addressing these challenges by fostering collaboration and providing spaces for practitioners to discuss best practices, share expertise, and build professional connections (Bottoms et al., 2020).

This manuscript advocates for the development of virtual CoPs as a solution for improving professional growth in forensic nursing. Virtual platforms such as webinars, discussion boards, and resource sharing hubs allow forensic nurses to engage in knowledge exchange regardless of geographic constraints. CoPs in healthcare have successfully supported collaboration among interdisciplinary teams, such as emergency departments using CoPs to enhance elder abuse response protocols (Bloemen et al., 2024). Similar frameworks can be applied by forensic nursing to improve clinical documentation and trauma-informed care. Examples of potential applications include discussions on trauma-informed care, strategies for improving documentation of patient narratives, and interdisciplinary collaboration with legal and law enforcement professionals. By providing opportunities for mentorship and continuous learning, CoPs can enhance the delivery of forensic-nursing care while supporting professional development.

Continuous participation within a CoP enhances expertise and knowledge through ongoing interactions. These activities promote a learning cycle in which individuals apply shared practices in the workplace, refine them, and then bring them back to the community for further feedback (Li et al., 2009; Mercieca & McDonald, 2021). In the dynamic field of forensic nursing, adaptable solutions are necessary to support both novice and experienced practitioners. Collaboration, technological integration, and strategies to address accessibility and inclusivity challenges are crucial. Mentorship, continuous learning, and resource sharing, including evidence-based practices, are essential for developing and sustaining competent forensic nursing professionals. CoPs represent a vital mechanism for facilitating these processes and advancing the field.

Historical Factors

The concept of a CoP emerged in the 1980s at the Xerox Palo Alto Research Centre in California (Wenger, 1998; Mercieca & McDonald, 2021). Historically, CoPs have been used in industries like healthcare to facilitate collaboration, knowledge exchange, and professional growth (Beaudet et al., 2023). Initially focused on how practitioners learn from each other in social settings, the idea evolved to include interactions between novices and experts and eventually concentrated on individual growth and group participation (Wenger, 1998). This evolution highlights the adaptability and enduring relevance of CoPs in fostering collaborative

learning environments.

Organizations like Caterpillar, Ford, and Hewlett-Packard began adopting CoPs as a managerial strategy to bolster competitiveness (Langley et al., 2017). These companies recognized the value of CoPs in enhancing knowledge exchange, improving skills, and fostering innovation. Recruitment for the virtual CoP will leverage professional organizations and outreach through nursing conferences and academic partnerships. Recruitment efforts should emphasize diversity in membership to reflect the varied expertise, geographic distribution, and experiences within the forensic nursing community (de Carvalho-Filho et al., 2020). Social media platforms and email campaigns targeting forensic nursing professionals across disciplines and locations will further broaden inclusivity. By integrating CoPs, these organizations maintained a competitive edge in their respective industries. This historical success provides a strong precedent for the potential benefits of CoPs in other fields, including forensic nursing.

Current literature noted an increased use and evolution of CoPs in higher education, as well as a need to better understand the discourse for health-profession education settings (Jenkins et al, 2024). In forensic nursing, the application of CoPs can similarly foster professional development, improve clinical practice, and enhance collaboration among practitioners (Terry et al., 2020). However, adapting CoPs to forensic nursing requires addressing contemporary challenges such as digital integration and accessibility. Understanding the historical context of CoPs highlights the importance of leveraging these strategies while also innovating to address modern challenges. This historical perspective not only validates the relevance of CoPs in forensic nursing but also emphasizes the need for strategic adaptations to ensure their effective implementation in today's digital and geographically dispersed landscape. Current literature noted an increased use and evolution of CoPs in higher education as well as a need to better understand the discourse for health professions education settings (Jenkins et al, 2024).

Social Factors

Social interactions and relationships are fundamental to the success of CoPs. Within forensic nursing, strong social dynamics characterized by trust, mutual respect, and a sense of belonging can significantly enhance the effectiveness of CoPs. When professionals such as forensic nurses feel connected and respected within their community, they are more likely to share their knowledge and collaborate openly, leading to improved professional development and practice standards (Wenger, 2009; Wenger-Trayner & Wegner-Trayner, 2015).

Despite their specialized knowledge, forensic nurses often undervalue their expertise and face gaps in practice guidelines and role confusion (Drake et al., 2018). Additionally, forensic nurses show unwavering dedication to integrity, moral discernment, and strict adherence to professional standards (Magdaleno et al., 2024). While forensic nurses interact daily with patients, a variety of multidisciplinary healthcare providers, advocates, and legal professionals, these specialized nurses have little opportunity to engage with their forensic-nurse colleagues (Mercieca & McDonald, 2021). Virtual CoPs provide opportunities for connection by fostering collaborative relationships and breaking down geographical barriers (Shaw et al., 2022).

Forensic nurses possess diverse skills, including clinical, legal, and communication proficiencies (Wolf et al., 2022). Inclusivity in CoPs means recognizing and valuing these varied skill sets, creating opportunities for mutual learning and collaboration (Woods et al., 2016). Virtual platforms such as webinars and online discussion forums allow geographically dispersed professionals to participate, breaking down barriers related to location and accessibility (Shaw et

al., 2022). Boundary interactions further foster inclusivity by creating opportunities for collaboration and mutual learning (Langley et al, 2017; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, 2009).

However, fostering inclusivity remains a challenge. Forensic nurses from varied backgrounds and locations must feel included and valued within the CoP. This requires intentional efforts to create an environment where all voices can be heard and respected. Inclusive practices can help bridge gaps and foster a richer, more dynamic learning environment (Mercieca & McDonald, 2021). Insights from healthcare literature highlight the importance of building trust and creating safe spaces within CoPs to promote active participation and professional growth (Terry et al., 2020).

Political and Economic Factors

The development of CoPs in forensic nursing is influenced by political and economic factors, as evidenced by policies governing healthcare access for survivors of violence. Legislative changes and funding challenges influence the resources and support available for forensic nursing practices. Coordinated efforts and leadership are critical in addressing fragmented approaches to care, as a lack of consistent strategies and sufficient resource allocation contributes to gaps in the system, limiting the ability to fully address the diverse and complex needs of survivors (Emsley et al., 2022).

Forensic-nursing practitioners may encounter economic challenges stemming from insufficient funding allocations. These limitations directly impact their capacity to deliver essential services to survivors of violence, jeopardizing the quality and accessibility of care (World Health Organization, 2024). Inadequate funding constrains resources for training and professional development and impedes the implementation of evidence-based practices and innovative solutions (Huo et al., 2023). Consequently, forensic nurses may struggle to maintain their expertise and remain abreast of advancements in the field. Amidst these financial constraints, CoPs emerge as a strategic response to mitigate the adverse effects of limited resources.

Furthermore, the presence of pervasive stigma surrounding mental health and violence-related issues intensifies the challenges faced by survivors, hindering their access to appropriate healthcare services. This stigma not only marginalizes affected individuals but also contributes to systemic barriers that forensic nurses must navigate in their practice (Moulding et al., 2021). In this context, CoPs can be viewed as an initiative-taking strategy to address these challenges by fostering collaboration, knowledge exchange, and support among forensic-nursing professionals.

Potential Impact on Forensic Nursing

Virtual CoPs in forensic nursing are anticipated to positively impact individuals by providing mentorship, reducing professional isolation, and enhancing knowledge sharing. At the organizational level, CoPs support the development of standardized protocols, improved documentation practices, and interdisciplinary collaboration. On a societal level, CoPs contribute to better outcomes for survivors of violence by equipping forensic nurses with the skills and resources needed to deliver high-quality, evidence-based care (Wenger, 1998; Wegner, 2009). These benefits translate into enhanced job performance, mental well-being, and overall professional satisfaction which then impacts their organization. By leveraging these collaborative networks, CoPs contribute to improving practice by enabling forensic nursing departments to refine policies, procedures, and resource allocation strategies. CoPs facilitate the dissemination of best practices, sharing of innovative approaches, and development of standardized protocols.

Moreover, CoPs foster enhanced community safety through the implementation of evidence-based practices and the promotion of interdisciplinary collaboration among healthcare professionals, law enforcement agencies, and judiciary officials.

Discussion and Recommendations

Evidence highlights the critical role that CoPs play in professional development across various fields. Wenger (2009) emphasized the CoPs enhance knowledge exchange, professional growth, and collaborative learning, which are essential for continuous improvement in practice. Mercieca & McDonald (2021) further argued that CoPs create a dynamic learning environment where members can share experiences, refine their skills, and develop new competencies. This dynamic is particularly beneficial in specialized fields such as forensic nursing, where practitioners require a diverse skill set encompassing clinical, legal, and communication proficiencies (Wolf et al., 2022).

A virtual CoP for forensic nurses should be a flexible platform that combines activities, such as webinars with informal peer discussions through virtual forums. Key steps for establishing and maintaining the CoP include assembling a group of committed members, defining clear objectives, and appointing a facilitator to guide interactions and sustain engagement. Sustaining a virtual CoP requires intentional strategies to maintain engagement and foster a sense of community (de Carvalho-Filho et al., 2024).

Regular virtual meetings provide an opportunity to discuss shared challenges and best practices, while asynchronous tools like resource-sharing hubs provide continuous access to educational materials. Regular activities may include:

- Webinars focusing on specialized topics led by experienced forensic practitioners.
- Peer support groups to address challenges, foster emotional well-being, and encourage knowledge exchange.
- Mentorship programs to guide novice nurses in critical areas such as documentation, trauma-informed care, and courtroom preparation.

These components aim to create a vibrant and inclusive community where forensic nurses of all experience levels can grow professionally and collaboratively.

The integration of technology in CoPs has significantly transformed how professionals engage and collaborate. Gonzalez-Anta et al. (2023) demonstrated that digital platforms can break geographical barriers, enabling widespread participation and fostering inclusivity. Virtual CoPs provide a flexible and accessible space for forensic nurses to connect, share resources, and support each other, regardless of their physical locations. However, Hartnett (2024) reported that nearly 30 million people (about the population of Texas) in the U.S. live in places that lack broadband infrastructure, posing a significant challenge to the accessibility of digital CoPs.

Despite these technological advancements, digital engagement in CoPs can also lead to challenges such as digital fatigue and burnout. Romero-Rodriguez et al. (2023) assessed digital fatigue in university students, describing it as affecting eyesight, emotional well-being, motivation, and social status due to prolonged exposure to videoconferencing. Similarly, Durmus et al. (2022) studied digital burnout which manifests as sleep deprivation, reduced efficiency at work, family issues, fatigue, and stress. During lockdowns in the COVID-19 pandemic, Gregersen et al. (2023) studied the negative effects of group participation due to dependence on

digital devices for working, studying, and socializing. To address these effects, Martins (2023) suggested scheduling online meetings once a month to provide members with enough time to recover. Additionally, employing diverse engagement tools such as webinars, discussion forums, and social media can help maintain participation and interest.

Gaps and Future Directions

While existing literature highlights the benefits of CoPs, there is a need for more research on the specific impacts of virtual CoPs in forensic nursing. Future studies should explore how digital platforms can be optimized to enhance engagement and support, particularly in addressing technological disparities and digital fatigue. Additionally, investigating the long-term effects of CoPs on professional practice and patient outcomes in forensic nursing will provide valuable insights for sustaining these communities. Specific recommendations for addressing gaps and future directions for CoPs are as follows:

Develop Robust Digital Platforms. To facilitate engagement, it is crucial to utilize virtual hubs, online tools, and social media networks. Ensure these platforms are accessible, user-friendly, and supported by reliable technical assistance. For instance, utilizing scheduling tools such as Doodle helps facilitators and participants manage the frequency of meetings and schedules to fit the members' lives. Informal synchronous interactions facilitated by video conference tools such as Zoom can promote collaboration among members from various locations, aligning with the community's preferred informal, whole-group discussion style. Also, asynchronous interactions like email and discussion forums encourage members to discuss at their convenience. Dedicated online platforms and social media networks provide a space for members to connect with each other and foster a sense of belonging.

Implement Structured Mentorship Programs. Mentorship within virtual communities of practice for forensic nurses is indispensable, extending beyond mere knowledge transfer to encompass growth and professional relationship building (McLoughlin et al., 2018). Experienced members play a pivotal role by actively encouraging members to learn from each other. This peer-learning approach enhances the collective expertise for all members not just for skill development but also to promote supportive networks. By nurturing strong mentorship relationships, members feel supported and empowered to overcome challenges and achieve their goals (Bottoms et al., 2020).

Promote Continuous Learning. Formal synchronous interactions using webinars are essential components of communities of practice. Webinars serve as real-time platforms that enable participants to communicate, learn, and collectively explore topics. Features like presentations and live discussions enhance engagement and bridge the gap between virtual interaction and meaningful collaboration. Overall, webinars contribute significantly to the vitality of CoP activities, fostering growth, innovation, and interconnected knowledge sharing (Shal et al., 2025).

Share Resources and Evidence-Based Practices. Create an environment that encourages sharing case studies, research findings, educational materials, specialized training programs, expert insights, peer-to-peer support, workshops, and discussion forums. These mechanisms collectively promote evidence-based practices, continuous learning, and active participation. To support this, potential funding sources or partnerships with healthcare organizations, academic institutions, and non-profits can be explored to ensure sustainable resource sharing and professional development opportunities.

Evaluate and Adapt. To ensure effectiveness of virtual CoPs, it is crucial to carefully address several challenges, despite their significant benefits. Technological barriers, virtual fatigue, and burnout are among the key challenges that require thoughtful consideration. Lack of access to technology or high-speed internet, technical glitches, connectivity problems, and software compatibility issues hinder engagement. Digital disparities or “digital divide” have been a concern among communities across the U.S. (Hartnett, 2024). For participation to be successful among CoP members, technology must be dependable, accessible, and user-friendly with technical support available for troubleshooting issues (Wallace et al., 2021).

In developing a CoP, understanding the needs and preferences of individuals in the community can assist with reducing digital fatigue and burnout. Maintaining a regular schedule of events and activities keeps virtual CoP members retained and involved. Additionally, implementing regular feedback mechanisms, such as surveys and focus groups, can help gather insights from CoP members. This feedback can be used to continuously improve the platform and address any emerging issues promptly.

Conclusion

Establishing a virtual CoP for forensic nurses presents a promising avenue for professional development and knowledge exchange. Leveraging technology and innovative engagement strategies highlight the importance of structured planning, active facilitation, and continuous evaluation in creating sustainable and impactful communities (de Carvalho-Filho et al., 2020). A well-designed CoP can facilitate meaningful interactions and support forensic nurses in navigating their profession with confidence. Addressing challenges such as technological barriers and digital fatigue is essential for the CoP’s effectiveness and long-term sustainability. Through collaborative efforts and a shared commitment to continuous improvement, the forensic-nursing community can harness the transformative potential of CoPs to drive positive change and improve outcomes for individuals and communities. This initiative can lead to better patient outcomes, enhanced public trust in healthcare systems, and a more standardized global approach to forensic nursing practices.

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