



Standard Guide for Sexual Assault Investigation, Examination, and Evidence Collection¹

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INTRODUCTION

Reports of sexual assaults have increased steadily in the United States over the past twenty five years. Although the reporting rate of these assaults has tripled nationally during this period, research statistics indicate that sexual assault remains as one of the most under-reported types of crime. These studies also indicate that the ratio of persons committing sexual assault to the general population is fairly constant. The rise, therefore, in the reporting rate of sexual assault reflects improvements made in U.S. society concerning how such reports are investigated and processed in the courts. These improvements have occurred in the areas of the victims movement and victim advocacy initiatives by the criminal justice system, improved police education and training, the women's movement and gender equality consciousness in society, sexual assault education in the schools and the public sector generally, and the evaluation of clinical forensic nursing. The articulation of these standards carries forward the spirit of these improvements so as to serve the cause of justice in society.

Although reports of child sexual abuse have also increased markedly in recent years, these reports are even more difficult to substantiate than adult reports. Many children are too young to realize that certain kinds of physical contact by others are inappropriate, and those that do may not be able to articulate their feelings, or are dependent upon the abuser for care, or both. When children do report sexual abuse to a third party, it may be dismissed as fantasy or falsehood. Children may be threatened or convinced that something terrible will happen to them or their families if they report the abuse, or that they were in some way responsible for it.

Traditionally, the successful prosecution of both adult and child sexual assault cases has been difficult. The victim often is the only witness to the crime. Consequently, the documentation of physical injuries and the collection of trace evidence may provide important corroborating evidence. Meticulous attention to detail in the collection and preservation of evidence combined with an empathetic concern for the victim, and a respect for the legal and human rights of the suspect is required. Within the community, this process is known to be facilitated by using trained forensic examiners in the setting of a multidisciplinary team.

1. Scope

1.1 This guide covers the basic components for the development of a sexual assault investigation protocol, with specific attention to the examination of assault scenes, victims and suspects of sexual assault, the recovery of testimonial, physical, and behavioral evidence, and the preservation and custody of physical evidence.

1.2 This guide outlines procedures requiring the experience of experts in a diversity of fields. A multidisciplinary team approach to sexual assault investigation is necessary and is the current standard of care. This team should include members skilled in the following disciplines: law enforcement, criminal-

istics, victim advocacy, and clinical, forensic practice.

2. Referenced Documents

2.1 ASTM Standards:

- E 620 Practice for Reporting Opinions of Technical Experts²
- E 1020 Practice for Reporting Incidents²
- E 1188 Practice for Collection and Preservation of Information and Physical Items by a Technical Investigator²
- E 1459 Guide for Physical Evidence Labeling and Related Documentation²
- E 1492 Practice for Receiving, Documenting, Storing, and Retrieving Evidence In a Forensic Science Laboratory²

¹ This guide is under the jurisdiction of ASTM Committee E-30 on Forensic Sciences and is the direct responsibility of Subcommittee E30.01 on Criminalistics. Current edition approved Nov. 10, 1996. Published January 1997.

² Annual Book of ASTM Standards, Vol 14.02.