

## Role of the Advocate in a Medical Setting

Edited by Sexual Assault Resource Services

It may be that your first meeting with a rape victim is at the hospital. In many respects, this can be an ideal setting because help can be provided several areas at once. The advocate can assist in explaining procedures and policies, offer concrete aid as needed, assist in clarifying options about such issues as reporting or possible pregnancy, and most importantly, be with the survivor at a painful and lonely time. You may need to repeat or to check with her for understanding. A calm soothing manner can be helpful to the survivor. Try to avoid technical language, medical jargon or words that the victim/survivor may not understand. When the person has adequate and accurate information about what to expect, choices to make, and her rights in the situation, anxiety and helplessness can be significantly reduced. Empowerment and healing can begin.

Your primary responsibility is to the survivor. Be courteous and tactful to the hospital, but do not forget your awareness of the needs and rights of the victim. Try to stay out of the way of hospital personnel performing their tasks and examinations. If you do not know the answer to a question or the reason for a procedure, ask the attending nurse or physician to explain. Many hospitals have had training to sensitize personnel to issues of sexual assault victims. The ethic of healing and caring is shared by you and hospital workers. But hospitals can be extremely busy places, (especially emergency rooms) and sometimes procedures can become bureaucratic. If you feel that a staff member is not sensitive to the person's needs, ask to speak to them in the hall. Explaining how the victim/survivor is feeling and the effect their behavior has on her can be effective.

You may have arranged to meet the survivor in the emergency room, been called by hospital personnel, or be accompanying the individual to the hospital. If you enter with the victim, let her/him give name and reason for being there. Introduce yourself to the hospital personnel you meet as an advocate from the rape crisis center as someone who is there to support the victim. If you are meeting the victim there, inquire of the person in charge of the emergency room for the name and/or location of the victim/survivor.

When you meet the survivor, assess her emotional state and what her needs are. These may include:

- Support and understanding
- Desire to talk about the assault
- Information: medical, legal, etc.
- Concrete assistance: notifying a significant other such as a family member or friend; a change of clothing; transportation home; a safe place to go after leaving the hospital.

- Use the time you have together to begin meeting these needs. A wait before or between examination can be used to process feelings, give explanations, or make arrangements.
- Explain the medical exam. Stress the importance of this exam to be sure she is physically okay and to begin treatment for any injuries. By emphasizing the person's safety, well-being, and health, you can help the victim/survivor to deal with feelings of being scared and hurt by the assailant.

Women who have never had a pelvic exam before may be very anxious about the procedure. Waiting time can be used to explain what will happen if she seems anxious about it. Women who have had pelvics before should be assured that the procedure is basically the same as those they have had before. A rape victim may be worried that the exam will be painful because of her possible injuries. And it may be. She should be assured that the physician will be as gentle as possible.

In the victim's mind, this exam may be the second time in a short period that a man has had access to her genitals against her will. It's understandable that the process may bother her. It *may* help if the advocate, a family member or friend is in the room with her during the exam. Explain that some women prefer to be accompanied and some women do not. It is her choice.

If she does choose to have an advocate with her in the examining room, there are a number of ways you can be helpful. She may tense up from fear making the exam more uncomfortable. Try to help her relax, using deep breathing techniques, holding her hand, talking in a soothing manner, explaining the procedures, etc. Take your cues from her. Not all women may want a "play-by-play" of what's occurring.

Whether to report the assault may be an issue to help clarify for the victim/survivor. By reporting the crime, a survivor is providing evidence the police may use in apprehending and prosecuting an assailant. In certain counties, reporting the crime may be required for the county to pay for the exam. Check your county's policy. If she seems uncertain or does not want to report the crime at this time, you might suggest that having the evidentiary exam will keep options open for the future. Without the evidence the victim has foreclosed options for the future in case she should decide to report or wish to press charges. The choice is the survivor's. You might offer to contact law enforcement if the survivor so desires. (For further information, see the chapter on Legal Issues.)

If the person is alone, ask if there is anyone she would like to have called. The survivor may wish to ask them to come to the hospital or just let them know where she is. An advocate should check with the victim/survivor about what kind of information to convey: is it okay to say that the individual has been sexually assaulted? Is it okay to talk with whomever answers the phone, or should the

advocate talk only to the specific person named? If family or friends are already present or are contacted, the advocate can inform and reassure them about the victim's condition. Some preliminary assessment of how these significant others respond to a sexual assault, and some brief information from you, can ease issues they may face later. This is not the time for full consciousness-raising, however. Assuring them that a violent attack is very scary and how the individual is now safe can put the priority on the violence rather than the sexuality right from the start.

Help a woman determine whether there is a possibility of her being pregnant and inform her of her options. Be sure to listen in a non-judgmental way and to enhance her choices.

Some survivors may wish to talk about the rape incidents now, either to you or to medical and police personnel. Let such persons do so freely. Sometimes in shock, victims may repeat the story as if in a daze or because the events seem so unreal. Others may not wish to talk about these traumatic events. They may find medical or legal questioning distasteful and frightening. They may be withdrawn or expressive. Whatever the feelings or style, validate them. Someone who can't stop crying may feel that they do not understand what is happening or that they are going crazy. Your reassurance can be important.

Let all survivors know that you or other advocates at your rape crisis center will be available to talk with when they want to do so. Be sure that before you leave her, the person has the phone number of your center.

The advocate should check about a person's safety when she leaves the hospital. If going home is not a possibility for some reason (for instance, the attack occurred there), the advocate can help arrange for a safe place for the survivor to go (to the home of friends, other family members, women's shelters.) They may decide to go home but wish someone to accompany them or stay with them, especially immediately after an assault. The advocate can help to identify such persons and contact them.