

# Victims of physical or sexual assault should have better access to medical services

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Victims of physical or sexual assault should have better access to medical services, report finds. Credit: Taylor & Francis

Victims of sexual and physical attacks should have greater access to specialist medical forensic examinations, even if they have not reported the offence to police, according to new research published in peer-reviewed journal *Forensic Sciences Research*.

The first known study of its type looking into clinical forensic medical services across EU countries provides insights into issues with services such as availability, ease of access for victims and the routine used for obtaining biological evidence.

Clinical forensic services are of great relevance for victim support because they ensure all victims have the right to access [support services](#). The authors are therefore calling for services to be expanded across all EU countries.

The new report reveals gaps and variations in clinical forensic services both regionally and nationally and highlights specifically the need for more features such as on-call support ideally round-the-clock, and standardisation of examination kits and documentation across the EU.

The researchers are also calling for an EU network that would promote the spread of services Europe-wide. They say such a set-up could improve support for medical staff and victims of violence through guidelines and standards. Cooperation across country borders would also ensure victims are protected efficiently, say the researchers.

Lead author of the study and university assistant at the Institute of Criminal Law, Criminal Procedure Law and Criminology at the University of Graz Sophie Kerbacher highlights how already, the work during this project has an impact, "The international cooperation during the JUSTeU! project was a first step to emphasize the importance of clinical forensic examinations and it has already proved to have long-term impact. Further projects arose out of the cooperation between countries, which previously provided none or only limited clinical forensic services but are now eager to establish or rather expand their clinical forensic service offers."

"Clinical forensic services secure evidential findings in cases of physical and/or sexualized violence. Therefore, those services serve the interest of victims of violence on the one hand, and on the other hand the public interest by securing legal certainty." says the study's co-author Michael Pfeifer, research associate at the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Clinical Forensic Imaging.

Sexual violence referral centres have a vital role to play in this by providing forensic examinations, regardless of whether or not the offence is reported to police initially. Scientific analysis of swabs and samples obtained by trained professionals as soon as possible after the alleged offence can provide crucial evidence in court cases.

Results showed not all countries offer examinations to victims who had not filed a complaint to the police. Other issues included services being limited to large cities and to older teenagers and adults and having no on-call provision. Respondents said

services should be built around raising public awareness, political or state support, and training.

The researchers surveyed relevant stakeholders in 13 countries including Ireland, Portugal and Italy between May 2017 to January 2018. Medical associations, and law and forensic medicine experts were among those who completed questionnaires.

They were asked about the status of services including availability of on-call examinations, the routes victims can use to contact a facility, exclusion criteria such as a person's age, and their future expectations.

**More information:** *Forensic Sciences Research*, [www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/20961790.2019.1656881](http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/20961790.2019.1656881)

Provided by Taylor & Francis

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