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## THE IMPORTANCE OF MEDICAL EXPERTISE IN CASES OF SEXUAL ABUSE IN THE PEDIATRIC POPULATION

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*Aurelio Vicente Stangue de Lara*

*Gabriel Chiquetto Kava*

*José Lucas Meira Stler*

*Wagner Bruschi Ferreira*

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**Abstract:** Child sexual abuse is a serious public health problem with devastating impacts on children's physical, emotional and psychological development. Forensics plays a crucial role in identifying and documenting evidence of sexual abuse, contributing to the protection of victims and the accountability of perpetrators. This article reviews the current literature on the importance of forensics in cases of sexual abuse in the pediatric population, highlighting the need for early intervention, the role of health professionals and child protection policies.

**Keywords:** Child sexual abuse, Sexual violence, Violence against children

## PRESENTATION

Child sexual abuse is a widely underreported and underestimated form of violence that affects millions of children around the world every year. In Brazil, the context is no different, and according to data from the Ministry of Health's Notifiable Diseases Information System (SINAN), 22,679 cases of sexual violence against children and adolescents were recorded in the country in 2020 (BRASIL, 2020). This number, however, may only represent a fraction of the actual cases, since many victims do not report it out of fear, shame or lack of knowledge of the legal procedures. Disque 100, for example, which is a national service for reporting human rights violations, also reveals the seriousness of the problem. In 2020, 17,934 reports of sexual violence against children and adolescents were received (BRASIL, 2020). This data shows the extent of the problem and the urgent need for effective public policies to prevent, protect and punish perpetrators.

It is crucial to note that sexual violence against children is not restricted to a physical aspect, but also has profound psychological impacts that can last throughout the victim's life. Furthermore, this type of violence often

causes immeasurable damage to the victim's neuropsychomotor development, as well as shaking the entire family structure, causing immediate and long-term functional, social and economic damage. Studies and research have consistently shown the devastating impacts that this form of violence can have on victims.

From an emotional point of view, child victims of sexual violence often experience a complex range of reactions, including intense fear, anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD is particularly common among victims, characterized by flashbacks, nightmares, avoidance of situations reminiscent of the traumatic event and a constant sense of imminent danger (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

On the psychological side, children can develop self-esteem problems, feelings of guilt, shame and difficulties in establishing and maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships (McElvaney, 2015). Sexual violence can also affect children's cognitive development, negatively impacting their academic performance and learning abilities (Hébert et al., 2009).

In addition to the emotional and psychological aspects, there are also physical repercussions that can arise as a result of sexual violence, such as physical injuries, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unwanted pregnancy in cases of continued abuse (Cohen & Mannarino, 1996).

It is essential to understand that the impact of child sexual violence can last throughout the victim's life, influencing their social interactions, mental health and general well-being. Therefore, public policies and interventions should focus not only on preventing this type of violence, but also on identifying victims early and offering specialized psychological support and adequate treatment to mitigate the damage caused (Banyard, Williams & Siegel, 2001).

Protecting children from sexual violence is therefore a social and legal duty, requiring a joint effort by families, educators, health professionals and authorities to create safe environments and protect children's fundamental rights. However, under-reporting and impunity are significant obstacles to protecting vulnerable children. In this context, the work of the country's Medico-Legal Institutes is essential.

The importance of the Forensic Medical Institute (IML) and the work of the forensic doctor in assessing child victims of sexual abuse is crucial for guaranteeing justice, protecting the victim and providing adequate treatment. The forensic evaluation carried out by trained professionals is fundamental not only for the collection of evidence, but also for the psychological and medical support needed by victims. This text will explore the role of the IML and the forensic doctor in this context, highlighting their relevance in the criminal investigation and in promoting the physical and mental health of child victims.

The Forensic Medical Institute plays a central role in investigating crimes, including child sexual abuse, by carrying out forensic examinations. According to Silva et al. (2020), these examinations are essential for collecting physical evidence that can corroborate the victim's complaint and help identify the perpetrator. As Oliveira (2019) points out, the coroner's role goes beyond simply collecting physical data, and also involves listening carefully to the child and providing psychological support during the examination, minimizing the traumatic impact of the evaluation.

The multidisciplinary approach at the IML, as discussed by Souza (2018), involves not only coroners, but also psychologists and social workers, ensuring a complete analysis of the case and the appropriate referral for treatment and psychosocial support. This integration of different professionals is essential for a holistic approach to caring for victims of child

sexual abuse.

In addition to collecting physical evidence, the coroner plays a crucial role in assessing injuries, as highlighted by Silva and Fonseca (2021). Injuries that may not be visible to the naked eye are identified through specialized examinations, helping to determine the nature and severity of the abuse. This technical expertise is essential for the formation of a robust expert report, which serves as the basis for criminal investigations and subsequent legal proceedings.

The work of the forensic doctor also contributes significantly to preventing retraumatization of the child, as argued by Carvalho (2017). Sensitive procedures and specific care protocols are essential to minimize the child's emotional stress during the forensic examination. The environment at the IML should be safe and welcoming, providing a space where the victim feels comfortable reporting traumatic events.

Finally, the importance of continuous training for professionals working at the IML is highlighted by Carvalho and Lima (2019). Training in forensic interview techniques, child trauma management and updates on care protocols are essential to ensure that best practices are followed and that the needs of victims are prioritized throughout the forensic process.

In summary, the Forensic Medical Institute plays an essential role in assessing child victims of sexual abuse, providing not only crucial evidence for the criminal investigation, but also medical and psychological care that is fundamental to the victim's well-being. The coroner's work, based on ethical and technical procedures, is vital to ensure that justice is achieved in a sensitive and effective way, protecting children's rights and promoting a fairer and safer society.

However, the number of IMLs available in the country is inadequate to meet the growing demand for forensic services, especially in

cases of child abuse. According to data from the Ministry of Justice and Public Security (2020), Brazil has a total of 420 IML units distributed throughout the country. However, this number is often not enough to meet the extensive demand for expert services, especially in more remote and less developed regions.

The annual demand for care for child victims of sexual violence is alarming. Studies indicate that thousands of cases are reported every year in the country, reflecting a worrying reality of child abuse. According to data from the Notifiable Diseases Information System (SINAN), the number of cases of sexual violence against children has increased in recent years, highlighting the urgency of expanding the response capacity of the health and justice system to deal with these delicate situations.

The shortage of IML units has a direct impact on the quality and efficiency of care for victims of child sexual abuse. Often, long distances and a lack of adequate infrastructure at IMLs make it difficult for victims to access expert examinations and specialized care. This can jeopardize the proper collection of forensic evidence, which is essential for criminal investigations and the promotion of justice for victims.

The uneven distribution of IMLs across the country is a structural problem that perpetuates inequalities in access to justice and health. While some metropolitan regions have well-equipped units with trained staff, more remote areas face significant challenges in providing forensic services. This scenario highlights the urgent need for public policies aimed at expanding and qualifying forensic services throughout the country.

The continuous training of professionals working in IMLs is also crucial. Training in up-to-date protocols for assessing victims of child sexual abuse is essential to ensure that

forensic procedures are carried out sensitively and effectively. In addition, the implementation of interdisciplinary strategies, involving medical teams, psychologists and social workers, can significantly improve support for victims throughout the assessment and treatment process.

In conclusion, the limited number of IMLs in Brazil represents a significant challenge for the effectiveness of the justice and health systems in assisting victims of child sexual violence. The expansion and qualification of these units is fundamental to guaranteeing universal access to quality forensic services, respecting children's rights and promoting social justice.

This article therefore aims to discuss the importance of medico-legal expertise in identifying and handling these cases, focusing on the need for a multidisciplinary approach to protect the rights and well-being of vulnerable children.

## METHODOLOGY

The main objective of this research is to analyze and discuss the importance of forensics in cases of sexual abuse involving children and adolescents, highlighting the relevance of medico-legal forensic evaluations in the identification, documentation and investigation of these cases. This study will be carried out as a systematic bibliographical review, covering scientific articles, case studies, literature reviews and normative documents related to the topic. The review will be conducted in depth to compile relevant evidence on the role of medico-legal expertise in protecting and supporting victims of pediatric sexual abuse.

Widely recognized scientific databases such as PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science and SciELO will be consulted, using combinations of keywords such as "child sexual abuse", "pediatric population", "forensic assessment",

“medical-legal examination”, among other relevant ones, as well as articles published in journals specializing in psychology, forensic medicine, pediatrics, law and related areas. Finally, guidelines and protocols from national and international public health, justice and social assistance bodies related to the forensic assessment of victims of child sexual abuse will be considered.

The inclusion criteria for this study will be studies that deal with: forensic evaluations in cases of child sexual abuse; forensic documentation methods used on pediatric victims; and the psychological and legal impacts of medico-legal expertise on child and adolescent victims of sexual abuse. On the other hand, studies that lack methodological clarity, duplicate studies or are not directly related to the objectives of this review will be excluded.

The articles will initially be selected by reading their titles and abstracts, in order to identify the studies that meet the inclusion criteria. In turn, the selected studies will be read in full for a detailed assessment of their relevance and contribution to the research. Finally, important data will be extracted, such as methods used, main results and relevant conclusions.

## **DISCUSSION**

Investigating cases of child sexual abuse is a complex challenge that requires the rigorous application of scientific methods and forensic techniques to ensure justice and protect the rights of victims. Forensics plays a central role in this context, providing objective evidence that can corroborate reports of abuse, determine the severity of the physical and psychological damage inflicted on the child, and contribute to holding the perpetrators accountable. This article discusses the critical importance of medico-legal expertise in cases of sexual abuse against children, highlighting

evidence from recent studies in the field of criminalistics that supports its relevance and impact on forensic practice.

## **EVIDENCE COLLECTION AND FORENSIC EVALUATION**

The proper collection of physical evidence is one of the fundamental pillars of medico-legal expertise in cases of child sexual abuse. Studies such as Nelson et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of thoroughly assessing visible and invisible injuries, such as bruises, genital lacerations, and physical changes that may indicate recent or chronic trauma. This evidence is essential to corroborate victims' accounts and provide input for the criminal investigation.

In addition to physical analysis, forensics also covers psychological and behavioral aspects of the victim. Research such as that by Hébert et al. (2020) explores the relevance of forensic psychological assessment to identify trauma symptoms, behaviors indicative of abuse and psychosocial impacts associated with the traumatic event. This integrated approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the circumstances of the abuse and the specific needs of the child in terms of psychological support and therapeutic interventions.

## **INVESTIGATION AND PROSECUTION SUPPORT**

Forensic reports prepared by coroners play a crucial role in supporting police investigations and judicial proceedings. Studies such as that by Smith et al. (2020) show that well-documented expert reports substantially increase the chances of convicting offenders by providing detailed information about injuries, relevant medical findings and scientific interpretations that strengthen the evidence base presented in court.



The accuracy and objectivity of medico-legal examinations are fundamental to guaranteeing justice and protecting the legal rights of victims. Research such as that conducted by Jones and Brown (2017) underlines the importance of rigorous methodology and impartiality when conducting forensic examinations, avoiding bias and ensuring that conclusions are based on solid scientific evidence and standardized procedures.

## **CHALLENGES AND ADVANCES IN EXPERT PRACTICE**

Despite significant advances in forensic practice, there are ongoing challenges that need to be addressed. The shortage of professionals trained in forensic medicine and the lack of adequate resources in some regions are obstacles that compromise the quality and effectiveness of the services provided. Studies such as those by Wilson et al. (2019) highlight the need for investment in ongoing training and infrastructure to improve the capacity of the justice and health system to respond to victims of child sexual abuse.

The integration of multidisciplinary approaches is also essential to address these challenges. Research such as that by Miller and Carson (2018) emphasizes the importance of collaboration between coroners, psychologists, social workers and other professionals to offer holistic support to victims, addressing not only the physical consequences of abuse, but also the emotional, social and legal aspects involved.

## **SOCIAL AND POLITICAL IMPACT**

The social and political impact of child sexual abuse cases underlines the critical importance of medico-legal expertise in protecting human rights and promoting effective public policies. Studies such as those by Adams et al. (2019) highlight how proper forensic analysis can contribute to public

awareness, preventive education and the implementation of legislative measures aimed at preventing abuse and protecting vulnerable children.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, medico-legal expertise plays a crucial role in responding to cases of child sexual abuse, offering support to victims and contributing to the prevention of this type of violence. It is essential to raise awareness about the signs of child sexual abuse, train professionals to identify and report suspicious cases, and implement policies that protect children's rights. Collaboration between health professionals, social workers, educators and judicial authorities is essential to guarantee a safe and healthy environment for all children.

For this reason, the importance of forensics in cases of sexual abuse in the pediatric population is unquestionable, given the complex challenges and significant repercussions that these cases present for both the victims and society as a whole. Throughout this article, we explore in detail how medico-legal expertise plays an essential role in identifying, assessing and documenting the physical, psychological and social damage resulting from child sexual abuse. The evidence presented corroborates the need for a multidisciplinary and specialized approach to ensure an effective and fair response to these sensitive cases.

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In conclusion, medico-legal expertise plays an indispensable role in investigating and dealing with sexual abuse against children. Based on an extensive review of the scientific literature in the field of criminalistics, this article emphasized the importance of rigorous collection of physical evidence, integrated assessment of psychological aspects, support for the investigation and judicial process, as well as the challenges and advances in forensic practice. Continued investments in research, professional training and public policies are essential to strengthen the response capacity of the justice and health system, ensuring that child victims of sexual abuse receive the necessary support and that perpetrators are held accountable according to the law.

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