***Nightintales* Podcast Transcript**

**Episode 5 – Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner**  
**Guest: Kelly Berishaj, DNP, RN, ACNS-BC, SANE-A**  
**Oakland University School of Nursing, Rochester, MI**

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00:00:01 Host:

Welcome to *Nightintales*. This podcast was created during *the International Year of the Nurse and Nurse Midwife*, and what a year that was. This podcast is dedicated to telling stories of nurses from across our profession. Our goal is to introduce you to the seemingly infinite possibilities in nursing and encourage you to find your true passion within this work. I'm your host Jessica Spruit, and I'm so glad you're here.

00:00:31 Host:

Today we have a special guest with us. We have Dr. Kelly Berishaj she and she is joining us from Oakland University here in Rochester, MI. Dr. Berishaj has an extensive history of working both in critical care and then also as a forensic nurse and clinical nurse specialist for the past seven years, and so we're really excited for her to talk to us about what it means to be a forensic nurse and what kind of opportunities may exist for nurses within this field. Welcome Dr. Berishaj, I thank you so much for joining us today.

00:01:02 Guest:

Thank you so much for having me.

00:01:04 Host:

If you don't mind just tell us a little bit about kind of where you are currently, and then we'll spend some time talking about how you got there and your certifications and things. But if you don't mind, tell me about your role currently.

00:01:17 Guest:

So right now, I am the program director for the Forensic Nursing Program at Oakland University. It's a graduate program that offers both a master’s degree in forensic nursing as well as a graduate certificate. And we are fortunate to be the first and only program in Michigan, and one of only a few throughout the country. And that's because forensic nursing is considered more of a new and evolving specialty in nursing. So, at this current time, we don't have as many doctorally prepared faculty and forensic nursing, so the education is a little bit more difficult to come by.

00:01:53 Host:

OK, so students who are interested in this would have obtained a BSN and then at that point they would pursue this opportunity for graduate education. Is that correct? At least a BSN.

00:02:04 Guest:

For our program, yes. What kind of the climate in our country, right now, is that there isn't an entry into practice, forensic for forensic nursing. And so, what that means is when you think of the traditional advanced practice nursing roles like a clinical nurse specialist or a nurse practitioner or nurse anesthetist or a midwife.

00:02:25 Guest:

You have to have at least a master’s degree. You have to be certified in order to practice into that area. But as forensic nursing is newer, there's not that same entry into practice. So, we have nurses who have their associates degree, their bachelor's degree, their doctorate degree, who may practice in forensic nursing. But what we've found is that because forensic nursing is taking care of patient victims, you really need to have a good foundational understanding of nursing practice and your basic skill set before you go on to something that we would consider to be advanced in taking care of patients.

00:03:02 Guest:

Comes and so that's why we are offering forensic nursing education at the graduate level. But we really do believe that all nurses need to have some underlying education in the specialty. But at Oakland, we've chosen to offer it at the graduate level and then we do also offer a forensic nursing elective as part of our undergraduate curriculum, and we've begun to thread that, that content through our curriculum, but unfortunately I have three nursing degrees and what I hear from most other nurses that I know is that unfortunately forensic nursing content is just not part of nursing curriculum. It's something that there's a big gap that we've been lacking in that area, so it's something that I think we really need to strive for to make sure is included in our nursing curriculum.

00:03:53 Host:

Sure, I think that's a really good point. When I was, you know, thinking about your role as a clinical nurse specialist and as a forensic nurse. I was curious what path led you to this point. You know, how did you learn about it? Because I do think it's a role that not many of us are familiar with.

00:04:10 Guest:

Yeah, that's a really great point. It's just one of those things that I fortunately stumbled into. I worked as a clinical nurse, a bedside nurse for the Detroit Medical Center for about 13 years. So, working at the Detroit Medical Center, I took care of a lot of patients who were victims, suspects, perpetrators of violence, trauma and maltreatment.

00:04:33 Guest:

So, I had been exposed to it in that regard, but I didn't have the skill set to do a trauma informed history to screen my patients appropriately. And if they did disclose violence or abuse, what to do with that uhm, I didn't know how to do a medical forensic exam or to collect evidence or to take photographs. And so, what happens is we all think we're doing the best that we can do.

00:04:57 Guest:

We don't even recognize that there's more that we should be doing. So, when I when I started teaching at Oakland University, our Dean at the time was a sexual assault nurse examiner and I had become a clinical nurse specialist and I was looking to move away from the bedside practice and really use my clinical nurse specialist certification. Yeah. And she said, had you ever thought of doing SANE nursing and I had never even heard of it.

00:05:24 Guest:

And this is probably was maybe almost ten, oh gosh, way over 10 years ago now. And so, when I started looking into SANE nursing and I did my SANE training.

00:05:34 Guest:

What I found was that while SANE nursing, or sexual assault nurse examining, was very important, it was one little, tiny piece of a larger specialty called Forensic Nursing and so that's where it really my path started. I went and got my SANE training.

00:05:51 Guest:

And I became really engrossed and fascinated with health care when the legal system intersects, which is what forensic nursing is exploring what we had in our state in terms of education and practice to meet these forensic nursing needs and what we found was that we have this really great tri-county system of sexual assault programs…Wayne County Safe, and Turning Point in Macomb and Haven in Oakland County. But we're really only able to serve sexual assault patients and maybe intimate partner violence patients. But all the other patients that maybe are victims of a gunshot wound, or a motor vehicle accident or elder abuse or attempted suicide, don't get those same services of this forensic nurse and so that's how we started developing this whole big program of forensic nursing to meet all the patient needs who are victims of violence, trauma and maltreatment and so that was kind of the kicking point.

00:06:48 Host:

Wow, well and as you described that what I'm hearing is such diversity within this role and such opportunity to practice in a in a number of different ways. You know with various patient victims as you're describing and all. So, with just a number of other patients, can you tell me a little bit about please if someone were to become a forensic nurse, what might a day look like to them? And I imagine this varies really considerably depending on what kind of forensic nursing you are in, so maybe even if you don't mind describing a couple roles of forensic nurses.

00:07:22 Guest:

Sure, and so what you describe Jessica is exactly correct. I see forensic nursing very much like when a student goes and gets their bachelor’s degree and they get that big, huge umbrella education of med surg, pediatrics, maternal health, mental health. All of those things and then more often than not they choose to sub specialize.

00:07:43 Guest:

That's how I see forensic nursing a big, huge, comprehensive umbrella like sexual violence, intimate partner violence, child maltreatment, elder maltreatment emergency preparedness, disaster management, death investigation, legal consulting.

00:07:59 Guest:

We get this comprehensive education and maybe you want to be like a forensic nurse hospitalist where you're in a trauma or emergency department and you are seeing all those victims that come in. Or maybe you want to sub specialize and work with the medical examiner's office doing death investigation, or you want to work with a law firm doing negligence malpractice review. Or you want to work for quality improvement risk management team in the hospital. When people ask me what they can do with their degree, I feel very flippant when I say, “whatever you want to do.” Some of our graduates have created their own job paths, others take these already recognized roles in healthcare that you don't recognize that as forensic nursing until you receive your education.

00:08:47 Guest:

People don't know that the quality improvement risk management. Well, if you understand how health care in the legal system intersect and you know how to dissect a medical record and you've worked with QI and RM and you've worked in all of these areas, that you'll be better served for that position.

00:09:02 Guest:

A new position that we're going to be working with is in a Department of Corrections. The criminally insane, we have a new contract that we're working on to hopefully have our students in the that area. For me myself, my sub specialization in forensic nursing is that I am a SANE nurse. I work with patients who are victims of violence, human trafficking, intimate partner violence and then we will see child and elder maltreatment sometimes as well.

00:09:32 Guest:

So, in that type of position. Our area hires full-time forensic nurses. You can get a salary, benefits, retirement, all of those things. Or what I do is I'm a contracted employee, so obviously I have a full-time position at the University and I'll pick up on call shifts to supplement their schedule.

00:09:51 Guest:

And so generally it's variable. The amount of patients we have seen. We've seen a tremendous spike in intimate partner violence and felony strangulation with covid and the state. Order from the last time I was on call, and so it's fair about every now and then I won't get a call.

00:10:11 Guest:

Generally, I'll at least have one or two referrals. A hospital calling with questions about how to handle a patient they have or I'll come in and do an actual exam. I had four calls in 12 hours and I saw two patients during that time and I think it's as a result of what's happening with the pandemic. People are staying at home and it's very volatile and people can't leave those unsafe situations.

00:10:36 Guest:

So, when I see my patient is, I perform trauma informed care I understand the neurobiology of trauma. I understand adverse childhood events. And how those impact my patient I know how to conduct a patient history. I conduct a trauma informed assessment. We do wound in injury identification and documentation on a body diagram.

00:11:04 Guest:

I take photographs of all the injuries. I collect evidence with a specialized evidence collection kit. We use alternative light sources and other special exam techniques to detect injury. Uh, we liaise with the Police Department, the crime lab, the prosecutor's office, advocacy to make sure that the patients receiving all the services that they may need, and then a lot of times that will end up with us testifying in a court of law as to the care that we received.

00:11:36 Guest:

The other role that I have is because there's very few forensic nurses in the state and in the country, especially with advanced degrees. And you know, a lot of training is asked a lot to serve as an expert consultant, so I've traveled in the country and provided education and training to emergency departments on how to do intimate partner violence screening for their nurses.

00:11:58 Guest:

I also have been asked by attorneys to serve as their expert witness, so particularly in cases where a victim may have never had a medical forensic exam, it's a delayed disclosure. Being back, you know, several years later, I'll review the records and I will testify as an expert as to why the patient may have delayed disclosure, why they wouldn't have had injury, helping describe female anatomy and things like that.

00:12:27 Guest:

So as a forensic nurse my life has become threefold teaching and running the program, because there's not many educators that are in this area. Expert consulting and then obviously practicing as a forensic nurse too.

00:12:45 Host:

Yeah, I actually just wrote that down when I was looking for you describing your role because I thought this presents such an opportunity for such great diversity and probably keeps you on your toes and you know you continue to feel probably very challenged. And you know, refreshed as you approach each of these different roles, because I think sometimes some of us, really, you know, appreciate that diversity within a job. I was curious because as you were describing as SANE nurse, when you come, you know, interact with a patient victim and you were describing trauma informed care which if you know if you're listening and not familiar with that, they, this is really an emerging awareness that we have of how best to deal with victims of trauma, and I think that another awareness that we have is probably that everyone we interact with is experiencing some trauma, and so we need to approach that with, you know, sensitivity and in ways that you know like you suggested, Kelly ,is guided by what we know about neurobiology. But I'm thinking about trauma informed care as you describe your documentation and the specifics of these exams.

00:13:51 Host:

This is really specialized knowledge. What does it take to maintain your certification? How do you get your continuing education? How do you stay, you know really well informed so that you can provide the best, safest care to these patients?

00:14:05 Guest:

So, I'm very fortunate, obviously, being in academia that I have access to UMD. I'm obviously teaching the courses and so I'm staying abreast that way. But the two there's two professional organizations that I would highly recommend. One is the International Association of Forensic Nurses.

00:14:25 Guest:

And that is where the SANE-A and SANE pediatric certification is through. They hold a wonderful annual conference which is going to be virtual this year, and they offer a variety of educational opportunities as well. They generally will put out our education guidelines as well for our same practice.

00:14:44 Guest:

And then the AFM, the Academy of Forensic Nursing is a newer organization that really looks comprehensively at our specialty. They offer webinars of once or twice a month. They're free right now and they cover a wide variety of type. Max UMD. And they are also working on a generalist certification for the forensic nurse.

00:15:09 Guest:

The other place that is very important in terms of forensic nursing is the Department of Justice. They put out several guiding documents on the medical forensic exam as well as the American College of Emergency Physicians. They have a document out as well regarding the care of the assault patient.

00:15:29 Guest:

Another important organization is the Emergency Association. They have a couple of white papers and documents in terms of care of the sexual assault patient as well as evidence collection, and I really want to stress the reason why I think forensic nursing education is important for everyone is that every single nurse is going to encounter a patient with forensic implications and it is our responsibility.

00:15:58 Guest:

Right now, forensic nurses aren't mandated. They're not part of our health care organization, and so a lot of health care providers do not know that there are state laws in Michigan that require health care providers to conduct a medical forensic exam with evidence collection if a patient presents to their facility reporting a sexual assault within the last 120 hours.

00:16:23 Guest:

If they can consult and refer out to a forensic nurse and the patient would like to go to see the forensic nurse that is fine, but if the patient wants to stay where they're at, those health care providers are required by law to conduct that exam. So, it's really all health care providers responsibility to know how to conduct a medical forensic sexual assault exam and a lot of people don't know that. A lot of forensic nursing principles apply to all health care providers in terms of mandated reporting in terms of documentation and injury identification.

00:17:01 Guest:

But what I find is that unfortunately we don't provide our health care providers with that education and training, even though they are expected to know it. So, what we're learning in our forensic nursing program, we find our students enhance their practice immediately because it's applicable to all patients. So, I think that's what is most exciting for me in that it's applicable to all patients.

00:17:26 Guest:

But as most frustrating to me as well, is that our health care providers just don't have that education that they really should have.

00:17:44 Host:

No. Yeah, it's to me it sounds to me what I'm hearing as you're describing this is this is a great opportunity for nurses to be an advocate for these patients to get them the appropriate care. Not only is it mandated by law, but it is in their best interest. It's the best care that we can offer them, and so I think all nurses, as you're saying, you know, in addition to being able to apply a lot of these principles we also owe it to these patients and their families to advocate appropriately for that intervention.

00:18:01 Guest:

You're exactly correct, and what happens with this forensic nursing education is you become the leader.

00:18:08 Guest:

You become the go-to person. I can't tell you how often as soon as you know colleagues find out that they have a nurse in their agency with this training they become that go-to person for trainings, educational presentations, conferences, continuing education and, so, healthcare systems and providers know that it's so valuable and needed.

00:18:30 Guest:

It's just hard in times of cuts to say, let's introduce this new role. But there are a lot a lot of opportunities available in the field, and that's something that's really rapidly growing and evolving, particularly now.

00:18:45 Host:

I always think when it's a relatively new field or something is rapidly growing and evolving. People who have a passion for that work have an opportunity to really then join that movement. And be one of the leaders in that movement very quickly. You know, there's great opportunity there.

00:19:01 Guest:

I will tell you that is 100% accurate. I would like to say I would be doing all these things. But I honestly the opportunities just present to you. People come and say, will you work on this grant with me? Would you write this book chapter? Would you please present that here?

00:19:18 Guest:

There's that here and it's wonderful and I hope that I'm getting asked because of my merit. But it's also because people know, you know, I need to know how to take care of a strangulation victim who could we possibly ask to do this. We need more on human trafficking. We need to know how to deliver, you know, trauma informed care. And that's what forensic nurses’ basis and foundation of their training. So, it's very exciting, but sometimes a little bit overwhelming because you kind of want to do everything. I want to deploy with the Red Cross and go to a natural disaster. I want to work with the medical examiner's office and go out to scenes of death, but unfortunately, you know, I have to pick my lane. You can't, you know I can't do everything but forensic nursing is definitely one of those things where there's a lot of different opportunity.

00:20:10 Host:

That's really exciting to hear about. Uhm, I was curious. Also, as you were describing, because some of what you're describing is probably really difficult care to administer. I can imagine that it may really take an emotional toll on you to see victims and to see some of the really adverse experiences that they have, and I'm curious how do you balance that.

00:20:32 Host:

How do you perform self-care? How do you offer that really compassionate care to that person in those moments? But then still return to your own life and maintain your own self.

00:20:42 Guest:

Yeah, I mean you're asking really great questions. Self-care is and some mental health, psychological care, is built into every course in our program because we call it vicarious traumatization where you yourself may have not experienced the trauma, but by taking care of the patient and having their lived experience, you end up with post-traumatic stress because you're living vicariously through your patient and so yes, we are very aware that's something that can happen, and so we promote self-care for ourselves and our students.

00:21:20 Guest:

For me, my yoga practice is what I do every single day and the colleagues that I work with that we can talk to and have those shared experiences. We always engage in discussion boarding with our students. So that we're always staying in touch with each other, and I frequently keep in touch with them and we like at Haven, where I work, we'll do shared events where we just get together for dinner and we make sure that we're checking in frequently with each other. At the end of each semester, myself and my students, we always do a self-health inventory and a check in with compassion, fatigue, compassion, satisfaction.

00:21:58 Guest:

So, we are constantly kind of doing check-ins with ourself, but I will tell you I'm taking the next two months off because that last shift where I had the four cases and the two patients that was hard and uh and I myself because I have three different, you know, careers going on in forensic nursing.

00:22:17 Guest:

I will take a pause on I can't just to pause on the school, but I will take a pause on practice every so often I will take a pause with my consulting every so often and just step back and decompress and refresh because it is very difficult sometimes.

00:22:32 Host:

That makes sense. I think it sounds like that awareness is so incredibly valuable in preserving you, and you know all of the skills and expertise that you bring to this and your longevity from a career perspective, that sounds really valuable.

00:22:45 Guest:

But that's important for all nurses you know, no matter what patient group you're taking care of, you know that recognition. Because I'll see newer nurses picking up tons of overtime. They pick up every possible shift. And that's where compassion fatigue, burnout, vicarious traumatization comes from the more load that you have, the more likely that you're going to suffer those consequences. So, you know having that healthy boundary is really important for all nurses.

00:23:17 Host:

I think that's such great advice. I was curious if there was anything else you know, if you could talk to yourself when you were a nursing student or one of the messages that you often delivered to your own students and anything else you'd like to share with us. Anything else you want to tell us about that you think would be helpful as we enter this? What I think is a pretty amazing profession.

00:23:38 Guest:

Yeah, I think. The words of wisdom that I give myself is particularly when we were trying to start this program, so the initial route we were taking, we just kept meeting roadblocks and I was getting frustrated. It feels like you're banging your head up against the wall and nobody is listening and we're trying to make new career paths with the forensic nurse hospitalist role.

00:23:59 Guest:

And it's just not happening and you get frustrated and what I really, truly believe is that the path that you're supposed to be on will unfold for you. If you're meeting that much resistance and that's that much frustration, or you're not happy and what you're doing, then that truly is not the path that you're supposed to be on.

00:24:17 Guest:

And as soon as you take a step back and breathe, the path that you're supposed to be on unfolds, and I think that's very much what has happened with my entire career, is that the opportunities have presented themselves. and one of my best friends has always said to me, and this is kind of where I'm at, why I'm taking pauses now, is that why would you do anything that makes you unhappy?

00:24:41 Guest:

If you are doing something that is not fulfilling you and truly making you unhappy, that's not serving you or anyone else. So, the great thing about nursing, is there are so many different avenues. So, when I have met that resistance and that roadblock where I find myself not being fulfilled or effective in that role anymore, I've pivoted to something different.

00:25:01 Guest:

So, I just applaud everyone for going into the profession of nursing. It's very difficult and very challenging. It's also very rewarding and lots of different opportunities, so not be too hard on yourself. And it will truly all work out. It will.

00:25:20 Host:

That is, I think really good advice and advice I think that we can apply no matter where we end up within nursing, you know.

00:25:27 Guest:

Yeah, or life in general? That's so true you're absolutely right, and I think that our work becomes such a big part of our life that it's important we are equally as attentive to, you know our happiness and the joy that we're getting from something. Not that every day is going to be perfect. But most of them should be pretty good.

00:25:44 Guest:

100% agree, yes you should. You should be finding fulfillment and enjoyment in what you're doing, and if you're not, then you know I just don't think it lends not only to you, but it's not lending itself to the people you're working with your family, your patients, and so there's nothing wrong with saying that this particular…cause I think a lot of people think, oh, I'm going to be an ER trauma nurse and then they get there and they realize, wow, this is bringing my stress level to an unhealthy area. They think you know for so long that's what they were meant to do. And somehow it's a failure if you don't fulfill that goal.

00:26:16 Guest:

There are so many other goals and opportunities and options that it just takes experience figuring out what the fit is for you. And there's nothing wrong with finding that right fit, right? Fit for you and you're the right fit for it, so that's what I was taught to our applicants for the program.

00:26:32 Guest:

You know, we want the program to be a good fit for your goals. But you need to be a good fit for the program as well, because we're talking about advancing practice, so it needs to be a mutually good fit, whatever you're doing.

00:26:48 Host:

Well, Kelly, it was such a pleasure to talk to you today. I so appreciate your time and all of the wisdom and insight that you've led us to. I think now this is a much better understanding of what forensic nursing means and the number of opportunities that lie within it. And I think that also you know your recommendations regarding self-care. And you know just that self-awareness is really helpful no matter where we end up. So, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us today and for sharing this.

00:27:17 Guest:

You're welcome, thank you for having me, and if anyone has any questions about forensic nursing and they are always welcome to reach out to me, they can email me. It's Berishaj: B as in boy, E-R-I-S, as in Sam, H-A-J, at oakland.edu.

00:27:34 Host:

Thank you so much, we appreciate that.

00:27:36 Guest:

You're welcome.

00:27:39 Host:

Thank you for listening to this episode of *Nightintales*. As you do, we encourage you to consider the unique nature of each person's journey through this profession. The views shared on this podcast are those of an individual, not the academic institution, that they graduated from, their employer or the professional organization that they are active in. The stories of their career path and progression are not intended to suggest that there is a uniform approach to achieving similar accomplishments, but to open your mind to all that is available to you. Each journey in nursing is as unique as each individual that we serve. We hope you'll listen again next time.