

FIGO Human Rights and Women's Health Case 10

Multiple traumas— sexual assault and substandard care

R.S., a 22-year-old woman, is admitted to the emergency department at 13:00 for evaluation of assault. She reports taking the bus home after a long day of work at the supermarket and then attending evening classes at the local community college. About three blocks from the bus stop, a man with a knife in his hand appeared from the shadows of a vacant parking lot. He pushed her into the bushes, raped her, and ran off. She gathered her clothing and ran the remaining five blocks home, where her mother was anxiously awaiting her arrival. Her mother drove her to the local hospital emergency department and now sits in the waiting room during the examination.

A nurse cleans multiple abrasions on R.S.'s thighs and knees and takes blood samples for HIV testing. The doctor sutures and bandages a small wound on her forehead, then performs a pelvic examination; he sends swabs to be cultured for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and collects a few blades of grass for forensic documentation.

When she is discharged, R.S. asks for emergency contraception and voices concerns about STI, including HIV infection. She is given an injection of penicillin and told that she must wait for the HIV results before the doctor will consider prescribing antiretroviral drugs. The doctor explains, "These drugs are much too expensive to be used for anyone who does not already have HIV infection. You must wait until your test results are available. Furthermore, I will *not* prescribe emergency contraception. I have never performed an abortion and I do not intend to begin with you!"

Exhausted and distressed, R.S. leaves the hospital with her mother.

Questions for discussion

1. What are the medical issues in this case?
 - a. What are the health risks and standards of care for a woman who suffers sexual violence from an unknown aggressor?
 - b. What therapies are available to reduce the risks of pregnancy, STIs, including HIV infection? What is the mechanism of action of each of these therapies?
 - c. What are the consequences of denying access to these therapies?
2. Using the Integrated Human Rights and Health Checklist, identify the human rights that were infringed in this case.
3. How did the practices of this emergency department support or infringe upon the patient's right to benefit from scientific progress to prevent sequelae of sexual assault?



FIGO Human Rights and Women's Health Case 10

Multiple traumas— sexual assault and substandard care

4. What changes in policies and practices of this department would improve care and protection of the rights of patients who are being examined for sexual assault?

