

SARCs: Benefits to victims, the police, and health services

A SARC is defined as

A 'one stop' location where victims of sexual assault can receive medical care and counselling whilst at the same time having the opportunity to assist the Police investigation into alleged offences, including the facilities for a high standard of forensic examination.

From this brief description, it can be deduced that the most obvious benefits offered by a SARC are related to victim care. These benefits are clear: the recent SARCs evaluationⁱ noted a number of distinct and valuable benefits to victims, both male and female, or rape and sexual assault.

In addition to these, a SARC should by its nature be a joint venture between police forces, health providers, the voluntary sector, and the criminal justice system. A good SARC will offer a wide range of benefits to professionals working with victims of rape and sexual assault in all these areas, as well as enhancing the capacity police and health services.

A SARC enhances the investigation and prosecution of cases, and enables health providers and support workers to access victims in an appropriate environment within a supportive framework and rapid timeframe. In addition, it can enhance capacity within the health service to deal with wider sexual health issues, and within the police to address sexual crime. The benefits identified include cost efficiency savings.

The following benefits have been identified by recent research and by practitioners working in sexual health and sexual assault investigation / prosecution. They have been broken down into the following headings for ease of reference:

- **Victim Care**
- **Police and Forensic Examiners**
- **Health services**
- **Criminal justice system**
- **Other**

Victim Care

- The SARCs evaluation states that SARCs offer a high standard of victim care, fulfilling the victim's right to bodily integrity, privacy and dignity. SARCs record very high ratings of victim satisfaction.
- An integrated service where the victim can have their various medical, forensic, advice and support needs met quickly and sympathetically. Victims of rape and sexual assault attending a SARC do not have to access the different services they may require across a number of locations or be kept waiting. Many SARCs are located in hospitals, and this allows access to appropriate staff and equipment, including A&E services if necessary.

- Higher level of satisfaction with and confidence in the investigation and criminal justice process, making victims less likely to withdraw complaints and therefore more likely to see justice.
- Provision for victims who do not want to present to the police.
- Encourage take-up of support in the aftermath of rape.

Police and Forensic Examiners

- The Police currently have the main burden of care for a rape victim from the point at which they report. SARC's relieve this pressure on police officers, and provide a high-quality service for dealing with the immediate aftermath of rape. The SARC's evaluation includes testimony from police officers on their great support for the SARC model.
- Some SARC's offer a Crisis worker who is able to provide advice and support to the victim throughout the process, which frees up police time.
- High standards of facilities and equipment for forensic examination.
- Some SARC's are equipped to take forensic evidence 'anonymously', i.e. without the victim having to report to the police. This has a number of benefits:
 - Police intelligence
 - with access to anonymously donated forensic evidence, police can build up a picture of a serial rapist even if all his victims do not officially report the crime
 - Individual cases
 - if a victim has forensic evidence taken from which their attacker is identified, they are likely to be encouraged to press charges.
 - Additionally, if a victim decides to report to the police some time after the attack, forensic evidence that would otherwise be unobtainable is available for the investigation.

Health services

- At present many health services, including GUM clinics, A&E, and GP surgeries, already deal with victims of sexual assault but offer a varying quality of service. SARC's ensure that the staff are properly trained to deal with extremely sensitive victims and police and other health practitioners will know exactly where to refer victims to in order that they can receive a comprehensive service.
- Victims of rape who are seen at a SARC will be provided with emergency contraception, HIV prophylactics if necessary, and will be screened for STDs. By providing these services, SARC's relieve pressure on GUM and family planning clinics, A&E, and GP surgeries.
- By offering immediate medical care and advice, SARC's reduce the likelihood of longer-term sexual diseases and unwanted pregnancies.
- Victims who receive good immediate care and counselling are less likely to need ongoing counselling and mental health care.
- Staffing structures enable staff to carry out a range of work activities, for example by integration with a sexual health service, which makes the best use of skilled resources, provides relief from the intensive work of dealing with rape victims and ensures the availability of staff supervision and support.

- SARC provide a focus for the development of professional practice and support for clinicians including forensic medical examiners working in the SARC

Criminal justice system

- High standard of evidence gathering and forensic reports (though there is currently no minimum standard).
- The evaluation of SARC decided that there was insufficient evidence available to indicate whether SARC resulted in increased reporting to the police.
- Potentially, longer-term cost-benefits can be achieved as SARC increase confidence in the criminal justice system and contribute to bringing more offenders to justice.

Other

- SARC act as a centre of excellence and expertise, and provide advice, training, and support to local health practitioners and police involved in this work
- SARC facilitate innovation and development of practice as clinical, forensic and legal practice changes
- Increased co-ordination between agencies (though there remains potential for further development).
- SARC facilitate the development of services, such as case tracking and support/advocacy, which address long-standing gaps.

ⁱ (Home Office Research Study 285: Lovett, J., Regan, L. and Kelly, L. (2004) *Sexual Assault Referral Centres: developing good practice and maximising potentials*