EViDENCE Kits: Empowering Victims with DNA Evidence from Novel Collection and Examination Kits

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Sexual Violence in Conflict: A Global Problem

Worldwide, sexual violence is systematically used as a weapon of war resulting in the victimisation of women, children and men. These crimes are notoriously difficult to document, investigate, and prosecute and a culture of impunity exists for the perpetrators.

There are considerable barriers to rape victims seeking justice for their victimisation, issues that are only exacerbated when the geographic region is in conflict. However, although there is limited literature that examines the experience and needs of victims of this type of violence, the issue of improving prosecutions has recently become the focus of international strategies (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2014). To facilitate justice for victims, forensic evidence corroborating victims’ accounts must be available to criminal justice systems, however forensic science is rarely accessible in such cases.

DNA Evidence and Sexual Violence

DNA evidence is a key forensic tool to identify perpetrators, corroborate victim accounts, and link multiple cases committed by the same perpetrator (Chancellor, 2014). Furthermore, research confirms that victims of sexual violence are more likely to report their victimisation to the police (and subsequently see their case progress through the criminal justice system), when there is forensic evidence to prove that the crime took place and identify the perpetrator (Chen & Ullman, 2010).

This strongly suggests the need to develop the use of forensic DNA evidence in sexual violence cases to support victim accounts. However, there are very complex cultural and technical reasons why forensic DNA is not utilised currently within conflict regions, such as a lack of appropriate training, collection and preservation methods and appropriate facilities to analyse the evidence.

Empowering Victims and Supporting Prosecutions

In order to overcome some of the barriers to the use of forensic DNA in conflict zones, we are working with a global industry partner to develop and test innovative methods for recovering DNA evidence from victims who are not able to access medical facilities (e.g. due to remote locations, lack of medical facilities and training, or safety concerns). These novel methods aim to empower victims by enabling them to provide valuable physical evidence, even in the most difficult circumstances, whilst remaining sensitive to the cultural issues associated with reporting sexual victimisation and undergoing an invasive forensic examination.

DNA recovered from these new methods can be used to:

- Identify perpetrator/s when suspects are available
- Link multiple cases to individual perpetrator/s
- Provide valuable forensic intelligence about the prevalence and strategic nature of these crimes
- Support prosecutions in the International Criminal Courts by providing high quality, physical evidence

The overall aim of this research is to make forensic DNA technology available for investigations of sexual violence in complex circumstances, such as regions in conflict or displaced communities, and to help victims around the world seek justice by supporting prosecutions for these crimes.