

Forensic Medicine and Medical Jurisprudence in India: Ethical, Legal, and Medico-Legal Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Forensic Medicine and Medical Jurisprudence represent the intersection of medicine, ethics, and law, forming the foundation of medico-legal accountability and justice in healthcare. In India, the practice of medicine operates within a robust yet evolving legal-ethical framework shaped by constitutional rights, statutory enactments, professional codes, and judicial precedents. This paper examines the historical, ethical, and legal dimensions of forensic medicine in India, focusing on the duties and rights of medical practitioners, medico-legal procedures, criminal and civil responsibilities, and the integration of forensic psychiatry and toxicology into the justice system. The research highlights the functions and disciplinary roles of the National Medical Commission (NMC) and State Medical Councils in regulating medical conduct, implementing professional standards, and addressing unethical practices and negligence. It discusses the Code of Medical Ethics (NMC Regulations 2023), the legal doctrines of vicarious liability and informed consent, and statutory frameworks such as the Consumer Protection Act 2019, Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act 1994, Transplantation of Human Organs and Tissues Act 1994, and Mental Healthcare Act 2017. Case laws such as *Indian Medical Association v. V.P. Shantha* (1995 6 SCC 651), *Jacob Mathew v. State of Punjab* (2005 6 SCC 1), and *Common Cause v. Union of India* (2018 5 SCC 1) are analyzed to illustrate judicial interpretation of medical negligence, euthanasia, and patient autonomy. The paper also delineates medico-legal procedures including inquest types (police, magistrate, and coroner), post-mortem examination, dying declaration, and the conduct of medical witnesses in courts. The interface between forensic psychiatry and criminal responsibility is explored through doctrines like the *McNaughten Rule* and statutory provisions under the Indian Penal Code 1860 and the Mental Healthcare Act 2017. Similarly, forensic toxicology and environmental poisoning cases are reviewed within the legal context of evidence preservation, analytical toxicology techniques, and DNA fingerprinting standards under Section 45 of the Indian Evidence Act 1872. Adopting a doctrinal and analytical methodology, this research synthesizes primary legal materials—statutes, case law, and regulations—with secondary literature from forensic and ethical scholarship. It concludes that the medico-legal framework in India has evolved from colonial codification to a rights-based, patient-centric approach grounded in constitutional morality and scientific advancement. However, persistent gaps in enforcement, forensic infrastructure, and medico-legal education continue to challenge effective justice delivery. Strengthening inter-disciplinary coordination among medicine, law, and forensic science is imperative to ensure ethical integrity, legal accountability, and the protection of human rights in medical practice.

Keywords: Forensic Medicine; Medical Jurisprudence; Medical Ethics; Medical Negligence; Vicarious Liability; Informed Consent; Consumer Protection Act 2019; Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques Act 1994; Human Organ Transplantation; Euthanasia; Confidentiality; Medico-Legal Autopsy; Dying Declaration; Forensic Psychiatry; Mental Healthcare Act 2017; *McNaughten Rule*; Forensic Toxicology; DNA Fingerprinting; Medical Council Regulation; Human Rights.

INTRODUCTION

Forensic medicine—historically known as legal medicine—constitutes the scientific application of medical knowledge to the administration of justice. It translates medical findings into legal evidence,

bridging the gap between clinical expertise and judicial interpretation. In India, the discipline's importance has expanded beyond criminal investigation to include issues of professional accountability, patient rights, bioethics, and human rights. The fusion of medical jurisprudence with

Relevant conflicts of interest/financial disclosures: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

statutory and ethical norms underpins the legitimacy and credibility of modern healthcare.

1. Evolution and Scope

The origins of forensic medicine in India trace back to colonial codification through the *Indian Penal Code (1860)*, *Indian Evidence Act (1872)*, and *Criminal Procedure Code (1898, 1973)*—instruments that established medico-legal obligations such as autopsy procedures, injury certification, and evidence submission. Over time, the scope broadened to encompass ethical standards, consent, confidentiality, and patient autonomy under constitutional jurisprudence—particularly Articles 21 and 47, which enshrine the right to life and public health as fundamental duties of the State.

Post-independence, the medical profession was statutorily organized under the *Indian Medical Council Act 1956* (now replaced by the *National Medical Commission Act 2019*). The Act's regulatory bodies—the NMC and State Medical Councils—are entrusted with maintaining professional ethics, accrediting institutions, and disciplining practitioners guilty of misconduct. Thus, medical law in India operates within a dual framework: (i) statutory regulation ensuring professional competence and accountability, and (ii) judicial oversight safeguarding constitutional and human rights.

2. Ethical Foundations and Medical Professionalism

Ethics forms the moral core of medical jurisprudence. The *Code of Medical Ethics Regulations 2023* codifies the physician's duties toward patients, colleagues, and society, emphasizing beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, and justice. A doctor's primary obligation is to preserve life and health, but this duty is circumscribed by respect for patient consent and dignity. Ethical violations—such as fee-splitting, false certification, unnecessary procedures, or breaches of confidentiality—constitute professional misconduct subject to disciplinary control by the medical councils.

Medical ethics thus serve a dual purpose: guiding moral behavior and preventing legal liability. Courts frequently rely on ethical standards to evaluate

negligence and consent disputes. The Supreme Court in *Samira Kohli v. Dr. Prabha Manchanda* (2008 2 SCC 1) held that informed consent is integral to patient autonomy and that any medical procedure performed without valid consent amounts to assault. Similarly, *Jacob Mathew v. State of Punjab* (2005) delineated the test for medical negligence, emphasizing the “Bolam principle” that a professional is liable only if no responsible body of medical opinion supports their practice.

The professional duty of care, therefore, extends beyond technical skill to encompass communication, documentation, and adherence to institutional protocols. Ethical compliance reinforces the legal principle of due diligence—a cornerstone of medico-legal responsibility.

3. Medical Law, Ethics, and Professional Accountability

The interface between law and medicine is most visible in the regulation of medical conduct and the adjudication of negligence. Medical law defines the boundaries of professional duties, while ethics shapes their moral compass. Together, they ensure patient safety, public trust, and professional credibility.

3.1 Medical Councils and Disciplinary Control

The *National Medical Commission (NMC) Act 2019* replaced the erstwhile *Medical Council of India (MCI)* to enhance transparency and accountability in medical regulation. The NMC and State Medical Councils are empowered to register practitioners, prescribe standards of education, and enforce disciplinary control.

Under Section 27 of the NMC Act, any registered medical practitioner found guilty of “professional or ethical misconduct” is liable to suspension or removal from the medical register. Complaints may arise from patients, institutions, or suo motu cognizance by the council. Typical misconducts include issuing false certificates, advertising, improper delegation, or violating confidentiality. The NMC's *Code of Ethics Regulations (2023)* lists these offences and prescribes penalties aligned with international best practices.

3.2 Code of Medical Ethics: Duties and Rights



The physician's duties—toward patients, the public, colleagues, and the State—form the ethical foundation of practice. The core principles include:

1. **Beneficence:** Acting in the best interest of patients.
2. **Non-maleficence:** Avoiding harm through negligence or recklessness.
3. **Autonomy:** Respecting patient decisions and informed consent.
4. **Justice:** Ensuring fair access and non-discrimination in treatment.

Doctors possess correlative rights such as professional independence, right to refuse treatment in non-emergency conditions, and entitlement to fair remuneration. However, these rights are contingent upon ethical conformity.

The principle of **informed consent** underlines autonomy. Legally, consent must be voluntary, competent, and informed. The *Indian Penal Code* (Sec. 87–92) and judicial precedents such as *Samira Kohli v. Dr. Prabha Manchanda* affirm that any medical intervention without consent, except in life-threatening emergencies, constitutes assault. Documentation of consent is therefore critical in medico-legal defense.

3.3 Unethical Practices and Medical Negligence

Unethical practices range from professional misconduct (fee-sharing, ghost surgeries, overbilling) to malpractice (negligence, misdiagnosis, failure to warn). **Negligence** is defined as the breach of duty resulting in harm that a reasonably competent professional could have avoided.

In *Jacob Mathew v. State of Punjab* (2005), the Supreme Court clarified that negligence requires proof of a breach of standard care and a direct causal link to injury. The “Bolam test” (1957, UK) remains the guiding principle: if a practice is accepted by a responsible body of professionals, it cannot be deemed negligent.

Vicarious liability also arises when hospitals or employers are held responsible for the negligent acts

of their staff (*Achutrao Haribhau Khodwa v. State of Maharashtra*, 1996). The *Consumer Protection Act 2019* further empowers patients to seek compensation for medical negligence, recognizing healthcare as a “service.”

3.4 Confidentiality and Professional Secrecy

Confidentiality is both an ethical and legal obligation. Physicians must not disclose patient information except under lawful authority, court order, or public interest. Breach of confidentiality can lead to disciplinary action or legal prosecution under Sections 72 of the *Information Technology Act 2000* and 126 of the *Indian Evidence Act 1872*.

3.5 Euthanasia and End-of-Life Decisions

The jurisprudence of euthanasia in India evolved from judicial activism balancing compassion and legality. In *Aruna Shanbaug v. Union of India* (2011), the Supreme Court recognized “passive euthanasia” (withdrawal of life support) under strict safeguards, later affirmed and expanded in *Common Cause v. Union of India* (2018). The judgment legalized advance directives or “living wills,” aligning Indian law with global bioethical standards.

4. Medico-Legal Procedures

Medico-legal procedures form the practical interface between medicine and law, ensuring scientific documentation and admissibility of evidence.

4.1 Inquest and Legal Procedures

An **inquest** is a legal inquiry into the cause of death. Under Sections 174–176 of the *Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC)*, three types of inquests are recognized:

1. **Police Inquest:** Conducted by an investigating officer in cases of unnatural death.
2. **Magisterial Inquest:** Undertaken by an Executive Magistrate in custodial, dowry, or suspicious deaths.
3. **Coroner's Inquest:** Historically conducted under the *Coroners Act 1871* (now repealed; limited to Mumbai earlier).



The doctor's role includes examining the scene, preserving evidence, and conducting postmortem.

4.2 Evidence and Documentation

Evidence in medico-legal cases may be **oral**, **documentary**, or **material**. Certificates, medical records, and postmortem reports constitute documentary evidence admissible under Section 32 and 45 of the *Indian Evidence Act*. Doctors issuing such documents must ensure accuracy, legibility, and preservation. False certification is punishable under Section 197 IPC.

The **dying declaration** (Section 32(1) Evidence Act) holds significant evidentiary value. If properly recorded—preferably by a magistrate in the presence of a doctor—it may form the sole basis for conviction, as affirmed in *Khushal Rao v. State of Bombay* (1958 AIR 22).

4.3 Doctor as a Witness

Doctors often appear as **expert witnesses** under Section 45 of the Evidence Act. Their demeanor, clarity, and impartiality directly influence judicial outcomes. The expert must confine opinions to their field and avoid speculative statements. The Supreme Court in *State of Himachal Pradesh v. Jai Lal* (1999 7 SCC 280) emphasized that expert evidence must be credible, consistent, and based on recognized scientific methods.

4.4 Postmortem Examination and Reporting

A **medico-legal autopsy** (MLA) seeks to establish identity, cause, manner, and time of death. Conducted under requisition from legal authorities, the autopsy must follow standardized protocol (Modi's Textbook, 2023; WHO Manual 2024). The report should include external and internal findings, toxicological samples, and diagrams. The chain of custody must be maintained for admissibility.

4.5 Specimen Collection and Dispatch

The collection of biological evidence—blood, semen, hair, viscera—requires strict adherence to chain-of-custody principles. Each sample must be labeled, sealed, documented, and forwarded to forensic

laboratories with a detailed forwarding letter. The *Central Forensic Science Laboratory (CFSL)* and State FSLs follow *Bureau of Police Research and Development (BPRD)* protocols for evidence handling. Any tampering or mislabeling may render evidence inadmissible.

5. Criminal and Civil Responsibility

5.1 Homicide, Suicide, and Injuries

Medical jurisprudence provides the scientific basis for interpreting injuries and causes of death under Sections 299–304 IPC (culpable homicide and murder). Differentiating between accidental, suicidal, and homicidal wounds is crucial in criminal trials. Injuries are classified as simple, grievous (Sec. 320 IPC), or fatal, with medico-legal significance in sentencing and compensation.

5.2 Sexual Offences and Medical Role

In cases of sexual offences (*Sections 375–376 IPC*), doctors play a key role in evidence collection, documentation, and victim care. The *Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2013* mandates that examination of victims be conducted by female doctors and in the presence of attendants. Consent, chain of custody, and trauma-sensitive handling are legal imperatives.

5.3 Medical Termination of Pregnancy

The *Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act 1971* (amended 2021) regulates abortion, permitting it up to 24 weeks under specified conditions. Violations attract penal liability under IPC Sec. 312–316. Doctors must ensure informed consent, confidentiality, and adherence to notification and reporting requirements.

5.4 Workmen's Compensation and Human Rights

The *Employees' Compensation Act 1923* mandates compensation for occupational injury or disease. The *Protection of Human Rights Act 1993* established the NHRC, which addresses custodial deaths, medical negligence in prisons, and public health violations as human rights infringements.

5.5 IPC Sections Relating to Medical Practice



Key IPC provisions include:

1. **Sec. 52, 80, 88, 92:** Acts done in good faith.
2. **Sec. 304A:** Causing death by negligence.
3. **Sec. 337–338:** Causing hurt by rash or negligent act.
4. **Sec. 201, 202:** Destruction of evidence or failure to inform authorities. These sections form the backbone of medico-legal liability.

6. Forensic Psychiatry

Forensic psychiatry examines the intersection of mental health and law, particularly issues of criminal responsibility and testamentary capacity.

6.1 Mental Health Laws and Insanity Defense

The *Mental Healthcare Act 2017* replaced the *Mental Health Act 1987*, prioritizing patient autonomy and rights-based treatment. Section 84 of the *Indian Penal Code* codifies the **McNaughten Rule**, exempting individuals from liability if, due to mental illness, they could not understand the nature or wrongfulness of their acts.

Judicial precedents such as *Hari Singh Gond v. State of M.P.* (2008 16 SCC 109) reaffirm that insanity must be established through expert evidence and contemporaneous behavior. The test of insanity is legal, not medical—requiring proof that cognitive incapacity existed at the time of the act.

6.2 Testamentary Capacity and Admission Procedures

A person's mental capacity to make valid wills or contracts is governed by Sections 59–60 of the *Indian Succession Act 1925*. Under the *Mental Healthcare Act 2017*, voluntary and involuntary admissions must be regulated by Mental Health Review Boards to prevent abuse. Consent, restraint, and treatment decisions are to be made in the patient's "best interest" consistent with human rights obligations.

7. Forensic Science and Toxicology (Legal Aspects)

7.1 Collection and Dispatch of Forensic Evidence

The integrity of forensic evidence underpins criminal justice. Section 53A of the *CrPC* authorizes medical examination of accused persons in sexual offence cases. Proper labeling, sealing, and documentation are essential. Chain-of-custody protocols ensure legal admissibility, as seen in *State of Punjab v. Baldev Singh* (1999 6 SCC 172).

7.2 DNA Fingerprinting and Biological Stains

DNA fingerprinting, governed by the *DNA Technology (Use and Application) Regulation Bill 2019* (pending), is widely accepted under Section 45 of the Evidence Act. The Supreme Court in *Bhabani Prasad Jena v. Orissa State Commission for Women* (2010) held that DNA testing is a legitimate scientific tool for establishing identity, paternity, and criminal linkage.

7.3 Poisons and Environmental Toxicology

Toxicology examines the medico-legal implications of poisoning—accidental, suicidal, or homicidal. The *Insecticides Act 1968*, *Drugs and Cosmetics Act 1940*, and *Environment (Protection) Act 1986* regulate hazardous substances. Common poisons in India include organophosphates, barbiturates, cyanides, and alcohol. Analytical techniques such as gas chromatography–mass spectrometry (GC-MS) aid detection.

7.4 Analytical Toxicology and Interpretation

Analytical toxicology integrates chemistry and pathology to determine toxin type, concentration, and physiological effect. Reports must specify detection methods, limits, and results, with interpretative remarks. Under Section 293 CrPC, FSL experts' reports are admissible in court without personal appearance, unless disputed.

7.5 Environmental Forensics and Legal Accountability

Modern forensic science extends to environmental violations—industrial pollution, chemical leaks, or groundwater contamination. The *National Green*



Tribunal (NGT) Act 2010 empowers courts to impose penalties and order remediation. Cases like the *Bhopal Gas Tragedy (1984)* illustrate the catastrophic impact of toxic exposure and corporate negligence on public health law.

8. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Forensic Medicine and Medical Jurisprudence in India occupy a unique and essential position at the confluence of medical science, law, and ethics. The evolution from colonial medico-legal codes to a contemporary rights-based framework reflects India's constitutional commitment to justice, fairness, and human dignity.

The study reveals that **medical ethics**, when harmonized with **legal accountability**, ensures the protection of patients' rights and the professional autonomy of doctors. The **National Medical Commission (NMC)** and State Medical Councils serve as custodians of professional discipline, but their regulatory mechanisms require modernization through digital complaint tracking, transparent disciplinary hearings, and integration with judicial databases.

The growing awareness of **patients' rights** under Article 21 of the Constitution, coupled with legal recognition of informed consent, confidentiality, and euthanasia, has transformed the doctor-patient relationship into a partnership founded on trust, communication, and legal literacy. However, challenges persist—particularly in rural healthcare, forensic infrastructure, and medico-legal training.

Medico-legal procedures, from inquest to postmortem examination, demand rigorous adherence to evidentiary protocols. Judicial reliance on medical expert testimony underscores the need for accuracy, impartiality, and scientific precision in documentation. The inclusion of digital forensics and telemedicine evidence in recent judgments (*State of Kerala v. P.B. Sourabhan*, 2022) illustrates the judiciary's adaptability to technological change.

In **forensic psychiatry**, the balance between patient autonomy and societal safety must be maintained through human rights-compliant mental health laws. Similarly, **forensic toxicology** requires infrastructural

strengthening, modern analytical equipment, and uniform reporting formats to ensure legal reliability.

Policy Recommendations

- Integration of Forensic Medicine and Law Education:**
Introduce medico-legal modules in medical, nursing, and law curricula to build interdisciplinary competence.
- Digitalization and Forensic Infrastructure:**
Establish electronic autopsy record systems, DNA databanks, and AI-driven toxicology databases across India.
- Uniform Protocols and Legal Training:**
Develop national standards for evidence collection, autopsy documentation, and courtroom testimony through the *National Forensic Science University (NFSU)* and NMC collaboration.
- Reform of Medical Negligence Adjudication:**
Introduce specialized *Medical Tribunals* with judicial and expert members to ensure faster, balanced resolution of medico-legal disputes.
- Enhancement of Mental Health Forensics:**
Strengthen forensic psychiatric institutions under the *Mental Healthcare Act 2017* to conduct ethical assessments in criminal responsibility cases.
- Environmental Forensics and Toxicology Governance:**
Implement strict monitoring of industrial and pharmaceutical toxins under the *Environment Protection Act 1986* with real-time FSL analysis.
- Victim-Centric Legal Framework:**
Ensure trauma-informed medico-legal examinations in sexual offences and custodial deaths, consistent with Supreme Court guidelines and NHRC standards.
- Public Awareness and Legal Aid:**
Promote awareness about patient rights, consent, and grievance redressal mechanisms



under the *Consumer Protection Act 2019* and *NHRC guidelines*.

9. **Human Organ and Genetic Data Protection:** Enact the *DNA Technology Regulation Act* and strengthen the *Transplantation of Human Organs and Tissues Act 1994* to safeguard privacy and prevent misuse.

10. **Judicial and Forensic Collaboration:** Establish medico-legal liaison committees at district and state levels to coordinate between police, hospitals, and forensic experts.

Final Observation

The strength of any justice system lies not only in laws and institutions but in their ethical implementation. Forensic medicine, by virtue of its dual allegiance to science and law, represents the conscience of modern legal medicine. As India advances toward digital healthcare and forensic modernization, the synergy of **medical ethics, scientific accuracy, and legal fairness** will determine the credibility of justice in the 21st century. Ensuring ethical responsibility, legal accountability, and technological competence will enable the medico-legal system to fulfill its ultimate mandate **“Justice through Science.”**

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HOW TO CITE: Ganesh Nale, Forensic Medicine and Medical Jurisprudence in India: Ethical, Legal, and Medico-Legal Perspectives, J. Pharm. Sci., 2025, 1 (12), 489-497.
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17866906>

