

# The burden of proof

Turning rape into a crime that could be proved forensically is only possible because of one unsung woman, finds **Vijaysree Venkatraman**



**Book**  
**The Secret History of the Rape Kit**  
**Pagan Kennedy**  
 Vintage Books

WHILE writing *Inventology*, a book on inventions that create social change and the people behind them, Pagan Kennedy became fascinated by what she describes as “a piece of technology designed to hold men accountable for brutalizing women”: the rape kit.

But who invented it? Newspaper reports credited Chicago police sergeant Louis R. Vitullo at the city’s crime lab, but a few accounts mentioned a woman he collaborated with. Kennedy investigated, and the result is a cogent narrative about a feminist technology and its inventor. *The Secret History of the Rape Kit* is a gripping book on a grim topic, written with exemplary grace.

In 1972, activist Martha “Marty” Goddard, a volunteer for a Chicago teenage crisis helpline, realised that many of the runaways she encountered had fled home after being sexually abused. Goddard spoke to rape survivors, lawyers and hospital workers to gain insights into a crime that can leave people feeling hopeless, even responsible for their assault.

What if rape could be proved definitively? After much brainstorming, Goddard devised a forensic aid: a box with items such as swabs to collect fluids, a comb to pick up hair and envelopes to store biological evidence, which police labs could use to identify the attacker. At last, Kennedy writes, sexual assault could join the ranks of investigatable crime.

Not quite: “When Goddard gave a written description of the kit [to Vitullo], Vitullo ‘threw her out of



this office,’ a source recalls,” writes Kennedy. A few days later, she continues, “he presented her with a full model of the kit. It was exactly what she had described.”

Goddard knew the kit needed Vitullo’s imprimatur to succeed, so she threw herself into the work needed to ensure its widespread use. Everyone in the chain of investigation – hospital staff,

**“Could rape survivors use telemedicine to perform sexual assault examinations safely at home?”**

crime lab personnel, police – had to be trained to use the kit and treat survivors with dignity. The public also needed to know about the right to forensic investigation.

By the end of 1979, some 3000 rape kits were filed with the Chicago police, writes Kennedy. That same year, in a first for the “Vitullo Evidence Collection Kit”, as the box had become known, an abducted bus driver testified

against her rapist. He was sentenced to 60 years in prison.

DNA fingerprinting started to gain ground in the 1980s. It was a technology so accurate that “it could transform a murky allegation of sexual assault into a slam-dunk case”, writes Kennedy. Already collected in the rape kit, the attacker’s DNA gained greater weight as evidence. From 1998, US police could use a national database to hunt for matches to genetic material from other crime sites and identify offenders.

While all this increased the value of her invention, Goddard remained unrecognised because of her lack of credentials. She became depressed and dependent on alcohol. When she died in 2015, the number of untested kits in the US was estimated at 400,000.

Goddard had both succeeded and failed, writes Kennedy. Survivors of rape were coming forward in greater numbers to be tested, but at over \$1000 per kit, testing was expensive, so police departments warehoused the kits. From 2010, when newspapers

**Rape kits are used to collect evidence of sexual assault for testing**

began writing about the backlog, women’s advocacy groups stepped in to raise awareness and funds. In 2016, the US government allotted federal grants for testing, leading to identification and convictions.

But, Kennedy asks, what of the millions of rape kits that were never even filed? She acquaints us with new activists re-imagining the system. Could survivors use telemedicine to perform sexual assault examinations safely at home, avoiding long hospital waits that can traumatise people?

Like a detective on a cold case, Kennedy has done the legwork to paint a vivid picture of Goddard, whose invention brought hope to survivors of sexual assault. This compelling book could win fresh support to her cause: ensuring justice by convicting rapists. ■

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