

DNA test key in state rape kit overhaul

Technology improves forensic evidence regard

BY CAROL DEMARE

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It was the first overhaul in 20 years of what is officially known as the sexual offense evidence collection kit and the upgrade was seriously needed, state Deputy Secretary for Public Safety Denise E. O'Donnell said.

O'Donnell's agency, the Division of Criminal Justice Services, distributes approximately 6,000 kits a year to hospitals throughout the state. Accompanying the new kit is a training, or teaching, video designed for medical professionals.

Albany Memorial Hospital allowed the producers of the video to use a portion of its emergency room to videotape the showing of the exam, O'Donnell said.

At a news conference at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital in New York City, O'Donnell, along with crime victims advocates, prosecutors, and survivors of sexual assault, said the hospital was one of 11 test sites for the new kit. One of the hospital's physicians, Dr. Lorraine Giordano, provided technical assistance on the video.

The DCJS commissioner stressed "how critically important it is to col-



Mariska Hargitay of NBC's Law & Order: Special Victims Unit

lect evidence correctly and science has expanded so much with DNA that we had to update the rape kit."

The new kit "advances dramatically our ability to collect forensic evidence to keep up with the advances in DNA technology," O'Donnell said.

Many smaller and rural communities don't have special examiners, but with the help of the video, nurses and others can be trained to collect evidence in the most scientific way, O'Donnell said.

Susan Xenarios, director of the Crime Victims Treatment Center at the hospital, said, "Not only will this instructional video make a differ-

ence in the training of medical providers in New York State, I believe it will ensure a higher standard of medical care and collection of forensic evidence for all victims of sexual assault."

The video provides a step-by-step demonstration on the proper collection of evidence. It features an introduction by award-winning TV actress and advocate Mariska Hargitay of NBC's Law & Order: Special Victims Unit. Hargitay, who plays Detective Olivia Benson, founded the Joyful Heart Foundation to help survivors of sexual assault, domestic violence and child abuse.