



## Psychiatry & Behavioral Science Section – 2010

### I13 Healthcare Serial Killers: Helper or Hunter

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By attending this presentation, attendees will be able to discuss serial killer typology, particularly as it applies to healthcare professionals.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by adding to the body of knowledge on a unique, alarming, and yet poorly studied phenomenon.

A New Jersey nurse was sentenced to 18 consecutive life sentences for the murder, over many years, of over 50 patients. An English nurse assaulted 13 children over a period of two weeks, leading to the deaths of at least three of the children. An English family doctor killed over 200 of his patients, making it appear that they had died of natural causes. These are rare events. Serial killings comprise a very small proportion of murders, yet are fascinating to the public. There is particular interest in individuals, working in "helping professions," who purposely harm, rather than help others. It is a phenomenon that is incomprehensible to many.

In the last 40 years, approximately 50 identified healthcare professionals, mostly nurses, have killed over 2,000 patients; the exact number of deaths and the extent of these types of killings are unknown. The actual cause of death might be easily obscured, appearing as the natural course of events or as adverse reactions to appropriate interventions. Perpetrators have been caught and prosecuted, often when epidemiological evidence uncovered multiple unexpected deaths correlated with a specific healthcare provider. FBI estimates have suggested, however, that as many as 500 - 1,000 patient deaths per year go unnoticed as crimes of malice.

Various typologies have been put forth to explain the motives of healthcare serial killers. The "hero" is one type of serial killer. When assuming this role, the health care professional creates a crisis and then comes to the patient's "rescue," thereby gaining accolades for his or her actions; patients die "by mistake," rather than by design. The "angel" is a healthcare professional that kills to relieve the perceived suffering of a patient. The "god" is a type of serial killer who kills to exercise the "power of life and death." The "hedonistic" killer murders simply for the excitement and thrill. There are also other proposed types of healthcare serial killers.

Healthcare serial killers differ from more typical serial killers in their demographic characteristics, characteristic behaviors, and the typology used to describe them. Healthcare serial killers are frequently women, infrequently use overtly violent methods, and generally do not have a sexual component to their behavior.

This presentation will explore the various types and characteristics of the healthcare serial killer, using examples from prosecuted cases in recent years, in an attempt to understand these unusual events. Comparisons will be made against common theories regarding more "typical" serial killer subtypes, demographic characteristics, and psychological profiles.

**Psychiatry, Serial Killers, Healthcare**