



### 113 Matricide and Mental Illness: An Italian Case Report

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After attending this presentation, attendees will be given the opportunity to reflect on a case of matricide and the peculiarities of this case presentation.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by emphasizing a perpetrator's lack of empathy in matricide as a sign of a mental disorder.

**Introduction:** A case of matricide (which came to attention for an expert opinion as commissioned by the Judge) provided the opportunity investigate this phenomenon and its peculiarities. Matricide, or the murder of one's own mother, has always been considered one of the most abhorrent crimes that can be committed, garnering intense media coverage all over the world.<sup>1</sup> Despite the coverage and furor that cases of matricide generate, the murder of one's own mother is a rare event. In the United States from 1976 to 2005, matricide accounted for less than 2% of all homicides in which the victim-offender relationship is known. This rate is consistent with studies from France, the United Kingdom, and Italy. Selecting only studies on matricide by adult sons, most of the perpetrators were single adult males with an intense relationship with their mother, a lack of interest in other women, a feeling of social inferiority, and an absent or passive father.<sup>2</sup> According to the literature, the majority of matricidal offenders suffer from severe mental disorders. In particular, matricide seems to be more common among individuals with schizophrenia or other psychoses, to such an extent that matricide was once referred to as "the schizophrenic crime."<sup>3</sup> Among schizophrenic conditions, the paranoid subtype is the most common.<sup>4</sup> Other diagnoses include mood disorders, substance abuse, and personality disorders.<sup>5</sup> Very often, schizophrenic offenders were influenced by psychotic symptoms at the time of the crime. Characteristically, such "psychotic" matricides are committed with excessive force and violence, while the post-offense behavior is non-finalistic and disorganized; concealment of the crime is mostly absent or somewhat mechanical, and the perpetrators usually confess.<sup>6</sup> These offenders often reported feeling that their mothers were either ambivalent toward them or excessively domineering.<sup>7</sup> Matricides are classically committed in the victim's home, usually with a weapon, although asphyxia is also common.

Several schemes have also been proposed to classify the different types of matricidal motives. In his sample, Green reported that the apparent motives were persecutory paranoid (47%), altruistic (24%), or other (29%).<sup>8</sup> In a U.S. study, Hillbrand identified four scenarios: acute psychosis (47%), impulsivity (28%), escape from entrapment (15%), and alcohol or other substance abuse (24%), with the latter being superimposed upon any of the other three. More recently, Bourget described four leading causes of matricide: mental illness, family abuse by the mother, compassion for the victim, and intoxication.<sup>9,10</sup>

**Methods:** The body of a 78-year-old woman was found on the floor in her house. Her head had been severely traumatized. Death was due to massive blunt force trauma to the head, possibly using a large hammer that was beside the body at the crime scene. The perpetrator was the victim's 48-year-old son, who lived with his mother and who had suffered from chronic paranoid schizophrenia for more than 15 years. He quickly confessed to the crime, adducing as motive the fact that he was convinced his mother was putting poison in his food, as well as practicing black magic to destroy him. The perpetrator was the third and last child, unemployed, and a bachelor with a very limited social and relational life. The man hit his elderly mother many times with a hammer and then sat in front of her all night waiting for her to die. He later explained that he wanted to be certain she was dead because, after the first blows, he had seen a demon-like vitality in her. He was found not guilty on the grounds of insanity.

**Conclusions:** In this case, as in others reported in the literature, the perpetrator of the matricide was a schizophrenic with a delusional disorder, and acted extremely violent. The main element of interest is the total lack of empathy with the victim while committing the crime as this is also an indicator of the mental disorder.

#### References:

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<sup>10</sup> Bourget D, Gagné P, Labelle ME. Parricide: a comparative study of matricide versus patricide. *J Am Acad Psychiatry Law*, 2007; 35(3):306-312

**Matricide, Lack of Empathy, Schizophrenia**