

A Review of the Functions and Motives for Criminal Poisoning and Application to Historical and Contemporary Case Files.



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Introduction

Criminal Poisoning – What we know from psychological literature and the media

- Criminal Poisoning is a murder in which the perpetrator does not need any physical contact with the victim before bringing about their death.
- The secretive nature of the crime has captured the public's imagination since the 19th century (Burney, 1999).
- Deaths owing to poison are only discovered after toxicological analysis has been performed, although this is not a usual postmortem routine procedure (Westveer, Jarvis & Jensen, 2004) – implying that poisoners have been able to evade detection leaving their identity unknown (Cleveland, 1958).
- This crime is committed against the most vulnerable in our society: critically ill patients, the elderly and very young children (Yorker, Kizer, Lampe, Forrest, Lannan & Russell, 2006)
- The demographic information of poisoners is predominantly unknown (Westveer et al 2004).

Aims

- Analyse the extant literature and available information that exists about the profile/typology of a criminal poisoner and psychology behind the use of poison, comparing this to a cohort of convicted English poisoners.
- Compile a list of problematic behaviours and answer questions of who criminal poisoners are and what their motives could be.
- Formulate an early warning system to embed awareness of such characteristics to inform policy and practice within risk assessment guidelines and provide scope for further research.

Methodology

- A systematic review was conducted of criminal poisoning and characteristics and attributes of poisoners using medical and psychology-based electronic databases from 1850 – 2014, which created the academic literature data set (8 articles).
- Online and literature searches of convicted criminal poisoning cases generated details of individual perpetrators who engaged in criminal poisoning throughout history, which created the cohort dataset (13 poisoners).
- Content analysis was applied to the two datasets, to systematically document attributes of individual criminal poisoners throughout history, to indicate details and shifts in criminal behaviours and victim selection.

Results



- The systematic review of the literature and cohort case files, do suggest characteristics and typologies that allude to a prototype poisoner.
- A clear interest or employment within the healthcare profession, in which personality dispositions (e.g. attachments and reversed value systems) from life events increase the risk of criminal behaviours.
- The main objective of poisoning is secondary gain or to feel a sense of power and superiority over their victim.

- In addition to this, themes of suspected or diagnosed mental illness that in turn influence interpersonal relationships and appropriate emotional regulation have been recognised.
- The perpetrator is usually forensically aware and willing to go to lengths to remain undetected, and will also feign assistance with law enforcement to remain viewed as a 'model citizen'.

Hypothesised/ Identified motives, functions and behaviours of criminal poisoners yielded from the literature and case files		
Characteristics of Criminal Poisoners	Case Study	Literature
Profession	• Graham Young: Fascination and interest with chemicals/science from early age.	• Cordess (1990): Will select or be predisposed to the medical/healthcare profession. • Yorker et al (2006): Will falsify credentials on record/background.
Mental Health History	• Beverley Allitt: Munchausen syndrome. • Christiana Edmunds: Family psychiatric history, unable to express feelings appropriately.	• Cordess (1990): History of previous psychotic episodes • Yorker et al (2006): Consistent with psychopathy/ Munchausen's syndrome
Motivating Factors	• Madeline Hamilton Smith: Self-preservation of her reputation and status. • Phillip Reed: Work pressures. • Benjamin Green: Secondary gain – from the excitement of trying to revive patients.	• Cordess (1990): Need for feeling of power • Furbee (2006): Secondary gain – excitement of superiority • Yorker et al (2006): Secondary gain from cardiac arrests or murder • Dietz (1988): Perpetrator will target specific victims.
Forensic Awareness/Engagement in Investigation	• William Pritchard: covered up criminal act by signing death certificates without autopsy. • Dr Thomas Neill Cream: Attempted to frame others for his crime. • Barbara Salisbury: Involvement with crime scene before and during incident. • Victorino Chua: Tampered with medical records whilst poisoning patients and blamed a fellow nurse for the crime.	• Westveer, Trestrail & Pinizzotto (1996): Cunning period of careful planning before crime occurs. • Howells (1978): Rational and calculated crime. • Trestrail (2007): select poison as an alibi- suggests drug knowledge/ high IQ. • Holstege et al (2010): Perpetrator will research information on poison.
Personality dispositions from life events	• Kate Knight: Little remorse for actions. Judge stated that the crime was premeditated and callous. • Harold Shipman: Traumatic early childhood event leading to emotional instability. Anger management problems. Drug Addiction.	• Cordess (1990): Controlled/sadistic behaviour model • Furbee (2006): Narcissism. Deflect criticism – will view as jealousy and bizarre behaviours are noted in retrospect. • Howells (1978): Parental alienation

Conclusions and Implications

Conclusions:

• The list of problematic behaviours achieved from the convicted poisoner cohort and the literature could be utilised to interpret suspicious behaviours which could aid a framework for an early warning system to ensure safety and raise awareness of the prevalence of criminal poisoning.

• The prototype poisoner has an interest or employment in the healthcare/science profession and the need for secondary gain could be related to the perpetrators diagnosed or suspected mental illness, which could have been influenced from previous life experiences which have influenced attachments and emotion regulation.

• There is scope for exploration of the applicability of this model in risk assessment or intervention of those that show an interest in poison, or have engaged in criminal poisoning.



Practical Implications:

• Perpetrators of criminal poisoning tend to be associated with the healthcare profession. Drugs are readily accessible and access to patients is available without arousing suspicion.

• This environment may be conducive for individuals that wish to utilise opportunities to cause harm to others.

• However it could be utilised as a communicative early warning system to provide a platform to voice concerns, ensuring patient and staff safety.

• The list of problematic behaviours could be utilised and employed to interpret patterns of behaviours and personality predispositions of criminal poisoners in the healthcare environment.

Limitations:

• Analysis of sample outside the UK was not possible due to primary resource accessibility.

• Use of secondary data sources prevented exploration of cognitive distortions of individual perpetrators, to allow for a comprehensive psychological explanation for the function of poison.



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