

**Report of October 2011 Meeting
Royal Society
Southern Highlands Branch**

Speaker: Professor Robert Kaplan
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Topic: The Clinicide Phenomenon: The disturbing
phenomenon of doctors who kill.

Robert Kaplan defined the term clinicide as the unnatural death of multiple patients in the course of treatment by a doctor. It is a complex behaviour affected by social, cultural, psychological and forensic factors. Just as the classification of illness and the practice of the treating doctor reflects the era in which it occurs, so do the circumstances of clinicide.

The study of medical killers is barely in its infancy. Serial medical killing is a relatively new phenomenon. The role model is Dr Marcel Petiot, the worst serial killer in French history. More recently, Dr Harold Shipman was Britain's worst serial killer and in the United States and Zimbabwe, Dr Michael Swango killed 60 patients. A number of doctors have such high patient death rates that it cannot be ignored. At some level, these doctors have an awareness of what they are doing, countered by an overweening refusal to acknowledge the implications or desist from further treatment.

Many clinicidal doctors have extreme narcissistic personalities, a grandiose view of their own capability and inability to accept that they could be criticized or need assistance from other doctors. Such doctors develop a God-complex, getting a vicarious thrill out of ending suffering and by determining when a person dies.

Kaplan described Dr Harold Shipman as easily the worst serial killer in the UK. He was killing patients from 1974, continuing with only a year's break when he was receiving treatment for drug addiction, until his arrest in 1998. Dr Michael Swango killed 60 patients from the time of his internship in 1983 until he left Zambia in 1996 (with several years away when he was in jail and out of practice). Between them, Shipman and Swango are credited with at least 313 deaths.

Some insight into the macabre behaviour of doctors such as these, and community perceptions of them, can be gleaned from a comment of the son of one of Shipman's victims. "I remember the time (Dr X) gave to my Dad. He would come over at the drop of a hat. He was a marvellous GP, apart from the fact that he killed my father." Again, nine months before Shipman's arrest in 1998, his practice was subjected to an audit

where the comment was made, “Great to see a single-handed enthusiastic GP with a rolling programme of audit – keep up the good work!”

Kaplan has made an extensive study of doctors who kill. In addition to Shipman, he has delved into the worlds of such monsters as Dr Harry Bailey, the Sydney psychiatrist who dispatched numerous patients with the discredited Deep Sleep Therapy. Then there is Dr Radovan Karadzic, the psychiatrist who led the genocide during the Bosnian War, murderers from history like Dr William Palmer who poisoned his victims for insurance money, and more recent cases like Dr Jayant Patel who terrorised the Bundaberg hospital.

Chilling statistics on Carer-Assisted Serial Killing (CASK) have also been investigated by Kaplan. In 2001, the Virginia State Crime Commission made the alarming claim that 65% of all deaths of people over 65 were not natural, occurring through active neglect, asphyxiation, starvation, under-or over-medication, suicide, poisoning, exposure, choking or arson. In 2003 in the USA, at least 18 people were charged with killing a total of 455 patients over a period of 25 years. Kaplan noted that the year 2011 is when the baby-boomer generation reaches the age of 65 years!

The 52-person audience was clearly challenged by Kaplan’s presentation of doctors who are commanded by the Hippocratic Oath to “first do no harm”, yet find themselves crossing the line to commit multiple murders. He was warmly invited to return to the Southern Highlands for a series of lectures, and readily agreed.

Anne Wood