It would come as no surprise that many readers may be shocked and intrigued by the title of our book. Some (especially our medical colleagues) may wonder why it is even worthwhile to raise the issue of killing by doctors. Killing is clearly antithetical to the Art and Science of Medicine, which is geared toward easing pain and suffering and to saving lives rather than smothering them. Doctors should be a source of comfort rather than a cause for alarm. Nevertheless, although they often don’t want to admit it, doctors are people too. Physicians have the same genetic library of both endearing qualities and character defects as the rest of us but their vocation places them in a position to intimately interject themselves into the lives of other people. In most cases, fortunately, the positive traits are dominant and doctors do more harm than good.

While physicists and mathematicians paved the road to the stars and deciphered the mysteries of the atom, they simultaneously unleashed destructive powers that may one day bring about the annihilation of our planet. Concurrently, doctors and allied scientists have delved into the deep secrets of the body and mind, mastering the anatomy and physiology of the human body, even mapping the very molecules that make us who we are. But make no mistake, a person is not simply an elegant biological machine to be marveled at then dissected. A person has a soul or, if you prefer, an innate uniqueness that can never be perfectly replicated. When a human being has been reduced to a compilation of tissues, cells, lab tests, radiological images, neuroses, and infirmities, it is easy to dehumanize a person. Ultimately, when an individual has been reduced to a cluster of symptoms, a list of billable diagnoses, a curiosity, an experiment, a pawn, or an inconsequential plaything, physicians may kill.

Doctors take lives for a variety of reasons, many of which are shared by other members of society. They may kill for financial gain or out of jealousy. They may maim and dismember in search of sexual gratification. They may torture to impose their will on another helpless human being simply because they have the opportunity to do so. They may kill just to prove they can get away with it. Or they may just become addicted to death and pain. Physician killers, however, also have been involved in murder for reasons not shared by the average Joe. Sometimes doctors have killed out of real or perceived “Acts of Mercy.” They have murdered thousands in the name of advancing science and medicine. They have been recruited by despots to twist their life-saving skills into tools of control, intimidation, and unspeakable horror.
They have focused their intellect on ruling countries with an iron fist instead of a comforting touch. Further, some doctors have been active participants in terrorism holding key roles in al-Qaeda and several Palestinian organizations. Simply put, when the Hippocratic Oath states, “above all do no harm to anyone,” they have claimed an exemption.

To understand “Bad” it is important to first understand “Good.” Physicians have served as healers prior to written history. Textbooks of medicine date back thousands of years and physicians have been featured in myths, plays and novels for centuries. In most cases, doctors have been portrayed as benevolent healers. Most advanced civilizations have developed codes of behavior for their physicians, ethical standards imparted to them above and beyond those to which an average person would be held. The first two chapters of the book present the background against which Medicine came into being and the forces that molded the social, psychological and professional profile of healers. We acknowledge that this part of the book has more of an academic coloration to it and some readers may skip to the “juicier” chapters.

We will continue with profiles of infamous serial killer physicians throughout the world. Some “practiced” over a hundred years ago, others in recent decades. It will become self-evident that evil doctors are spread throughout the world – no place is immune. Murderous physicians have employed all of the scientific tools available to them in their killing sprees. It is highly likely that several are still honing their craft as you sit here reading. It is only a matter of time until we see the first genetic homicides, murder by means of chromosomal manipulation.

Physicians have actively and passively participated in the taking of thousands of innocent lives. Physician-scientists have engaged in medical experimentation on captives, prisoners of war, children, the aged, inmates, the mentally challenged, and their own military personnel. They have been instrumental in genocide as witnessed by their activities during the Holocaust of World War II. In addition to Nazi experimentation, Japanese physicians of the same era committed innumerable atrocities. America is guilty as well, particularly in developing means of breaking the human mind. To be fair, doctors don’t only experiment on helpless victims; many have staked their careers and lives on self-experimentation.

Physicians have been involved in politics for decades, often behind the scenes but occasionally as active participants. They have also ruled as malevolent dictators, been the targets of extermination, and most recently contributed to the horrors of international and domestic terrorism. These creative minds invented such atrocities as “suicide bombers” and “skyjackings.” What a waste of their talent, choosing to kill thousands rather than curing hundreds.

We will share our thoughts on some of the ethical issues facing physicians today. It can be hard to draw the line between compassionate patient care and murder. Is “Mercy Killing” all that merciful? Is euthanasia ethical and, if so, how does it differ from the philosophy promulgated by the Nazi regime? When does malpractice cross the line into murder? There are many gray areas between Medicine and Law. We cannot hope to resolve these but we hope that we can at least get you thinking.
We will end with current fashions and trends. Complementary medicine and alternative therapies have brought relief to many patients. They have also resulted in disability, suffering, and death. Bear in mind, just because something is natural doesn’t always mean it’s good for you – cocaine and heroin come from plants, you know. We will take a look at how doctors are portrayed in fiction and attempt to answer why medical professionals are so prominently featured on television and in movies. How exactly did Dr. Kildare morph into Hannibal “the Cannibal” Lecter? We will finish up with the timely topic of the potentially unhealthy, master/pet relationships characteristic of celebrities and their personal physicians.

The authors of this book have been doctors for over 60 years. As forensic pathologists, we see death every day and have investigated hundreds and hundreds of murders. You will be relieved to know that most people are not killed by physicians. Quite the contrary, every day we see evidence of the heroic efforts made by healthcare providers to save lives. By and large, doctors are good people.

This book contains accounts of horrible atrocities, but it is not a horror story. It features descriptions of graphic murders committed by healers, but it is not pulp fiction. It follows the rise of tyrants and the torture of their subjects, but it does not make a political statement. It brings to light the risks patients face today given the wide array of treatment options, but it is not an exposé. All we hope to do is to accurately relay the circumstances of when, how, and why doctors kill.
When Doctors Kill
Who, Why, and How
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