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 (Butner, 1999).
• Deaths owing to poison are only discovered after toxicological analysis has been performed, although this is not a usual postmortem routine procedure (Westveer, 1998).
• The criminal is committed against the most vulnerable in our society: critically ill patients, the elderly and very young children (Cleckley, 1978).
• This crime is committed against the most vulnerable in our society: critically ill patients, the elderly and very young children (Cleckley, 1978).
• The demographic information of poisoned is predominantly unknown (Westvee et al, 2004).

Aims

• Analyse the extant literature and available information that exists about the profectotyphology 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 poisoned victims using medical and psychology-based electronic databases from 1830 – 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 data (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.

Introduction

• 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 dispositional characteristics (for example, attachments and reversed value systems) from life events increase the risk of criminal behaviours.
• The main objective of poisoning is secondary gain 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 gain 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Criminal Poisoners</th>
<th>Case Study</th>
<th>Literature</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personality dispositions from life events</td>
<td>Kate Knights: Little remorse for actions. Judge stated that the crime was premeditated and calculated.</td>
<td>Yearker et al (2006): Secondary gain from cardiac arrests or murder.</td>
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Conclusions and Implications

• The list of problematic behaviors 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 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.