



The Case of the KILLER NURSE...AGAIN

A new book about a mysterious serial killer puts the spotlight back on an episode that still makes Steven Marcus frustrated, sad and angry, ten years later.

Words by Maryann Brinley / photograph by Andrew Hanenburg

Steven Marcus, MD, has never been known for hiding his emotions. “People say I’m obnoxious,” he admits. But, “that is how I get things accomplished while others don’t.”

For more than 30 years as the director of the New Jersey Poison Information and Education System (NJPIES) at UMDNJ-New Jersey Medical School (NJMS), this veteran medical detective has found himself immersed in so many fascinating medical dramas. One in particular keeps coming back to flood him with strong feelings. This time around, it pushed him back into the spotlight on CBS’s *60 Minutes* on Sunday, April 28, 2013. How could he ever forget the case of the killer nurse, Charles Cullen: a serial murderer whose capture might have continued to elude authorities if it weren’t for Marcus’ dogged outspoken nature? Now serving a life sentence, Cullen agreed to be interviewed for *60 Minutes* because of a new book about his life, *The Good Nurse* by Charles Graeber.

Staffed by nurses, pharmacists and physicians, the NJPIES bank of poison experts handles 70,000 incoming calls annually about possible drug overdoses or poisonings. Poisoning from eating puffer fish...nearly deadly gulps of Snapple...teenagers smoking the fluorescent stuff in highway exit signs...and an urgent call back in July 2003 from a pharmacist at Somerset Medical Center in reference to mysterious deaths, possibly from an herbal tea complication but more clearly cases of drug overdosing with digoxin, a heart medication.

In viewing any complex, unsolved medical case, Marcus tries to “think out of the box,” questioning both himself and everyone else at every turn about what is known.” He’s willing to “go the extra mile,” as he says, and to be as persistent as his hero Sam Adams who once stated, “It does not require a majority to prevail, but rather an irate, tireless minority keen to set brushfires in people’s minds.” And that is exactly what Marcus did when speaking on the telephone in a conversation he recorded in July 2003 with William K. Cors, MD, chief medical officer at the Somerset Medical Center. Cors claimed to have been trying to conduct his hospital’s own internal investigation. All the bells and whistles of alarm were screaming for Marcus. Time was of the essence and lives were at stake. “We had a legal obligation to report. It was a police matter.” Patients were dying from toxic

levels of digoxin and insulin in the intensive care unit of that hospital. Marcus, who was startled by the pattern of overdoses, told Somerset’s administrators that he intended to report the case to the Department of Health and Senior Services...that day.

Meanwhile, in a frustrating turn of events, the state allowed Somerset to continue its own investigation and they simply dispatched a team to test the lab equipment at the hospital. Prompted by Marcus’ warning, the hospital had reported to the state “four abnormal lab values” involving patients and offered no computer evidence linking Cullen to the overdoses. Five more people would die at the hands of this convicted killer, who continued to work in the critical care unit, for the next three months.

An emotional Marcus told *60 Minutes* interviewer Steve Kroft, “Those five deaths...I’ll remember them for the rest of my life.”

“I grew up reading Dick Tracy, Superman and all the super heroes,” recalls Marcus, a professor in the Department of Preventive Medicine and Community Health. The Latin phrase may be “carpe diem” but, for this investigator, it should really be “carpe momento,” or seize the moment, he insists. Something that didn’t happen in the Cullen case. For despite Marcus’ badgering, neither Somerset Medical Center nor the New Jersey Department of Health reported the events. Marcus assumes that despite the evidence to the contrary, no one believed that an employee could be killing patients intentionally. As Cors first told Marcus in July, “What we are wrestling with is throwing the whole institution into chaos...versus responsibility to protect patients from further harm.” An idea that still makes Marcus angry ten years later. It wasn’t until early October when another patient died that hospital executives finally followed Marcus’ advice to call the county prosecutor and state officials. They never told the prosecutor of Marcus’ involvement and the detectives investigating the report had to stumble upon that themselves. According to the book, Cullen worked an ICU shift the night before his arrest and had already accepted a job at another institution. He was preparing to leave



STEVEN MARCUS
COPY TO COME



Somerset Medical Center as he had left all of the previous hospitals, without a blemish on his record.

When he was eventually arrested, Cullen told a shocking story with little remorse about his 16 years as a caregiver and killer. He admitted to fatally poisoning 12 to 15 patients at Somerset, at least a half dozen at St. Luke’s Hospital in Fountain Hill, PA and 10 to 20 more at other health care facilities. His career as a night nurse had taken him to seven hospitals from St. Barnabas Medical Center in Livingston, Warren Hospital in Phillipsburg, Hunterdon Medical

Center in Flemington, to Sacred Heart Hospital in Allentown, PA, and Lehigh Valley Hospital in Salisbury Township, PA, among others. While suspicions would always surface — even fellow nurses at one facility where he worked reported him to the police — and he would be fired routinely, he was repeatedly rehired by other health care facilities... until Steven Marcus refused to keep quiet or walk away from the case.

As part of Cullen’s plea bargain, he agreed to bring closure to families whose loved ones may have been his victim at various hospitals during his nursing career. Marcus was asked to review cases and meet with Cullen to discuss his involvement. They reached consensus on many cases but there were lots left without Cullen admitting involvement, because he did not want to look like more of a monster. The detectives from the prosecutor’s office were present when Marcus and Cullen met. At the end of the day, one of the detectives turned to a shattered-looking Marcus and said, “You look puzzled. Haven’t you ever met a serial killer before?”

A division of the Department of Preventive Medicine and Community Health of the New Jersey Medical School, NJPIES relies on state and federal funding with additional support from contracts for supplying data to some research programs. Funds also come from hospital memberships, which dropped 50 percent in 2009. NJPIES will continue to operate and become part of Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, when the schools are integrated on July 1, 2013. Just recently, in an effort to trim costs, NJPIES was forced to lay off a long term administrative employee, its sole epidemiologist, cut its hotline specialist positions, decrease its preventive educational efforts, and, in an unprecedented move, Marcus cut his own salary by 30 percent. Marcus warned that there is evidence that closing NJPIES would mean a rise in

potentially preventable deaths, more unnecessary visits to emergency rooms, and the loss of the state’s “early warning system” for outbreaks or medications that need to be recalled.

Maybe it’s his Jewish heritage because by religious tradition, “we seem to be taught to argue and debate,” he says. “No one has ever said that Steven Marcus was at a loss for words.” A personality trait that is coming in handy right now, as he fights for the survival of NJPIES in an era of budget cuts, mergers and funding crises. ■