

## WHY DO THEY DO IT?

### DR. HAROLD SHIPMAN



Dr. Harold Shipman is one of the top three most prolific serial killers on official record in the Western world. He is known to have killed more than 250 of his patients. The only serial killers on record that exceed him are both from Colombia: Pedro Lopez, the “Monster of the Andes,” believed to have killed 300 people, and Luis Garavito, “Le Bestia” or the beast, believed to have killed

more than 400 people, including more than 100 children. However, Shipman could rank number one if you break the list into categories of serial killers. After all, the others were predatory, hedonistic serial killers, but Dr. Shipman was an “Angel of Death.” He was supposed to be helping his patients (indeed, he was paid to do so), but instead he killed them.

Shipman would typically inject his victims, almost always women, with lethal doses of diamorphine (i.e., heroin). It is believed he began killing patients in the late 1970s or early 1980s and continued until he was caught in the late 1990s. Investigators became suspicious when he was named in one of his victim’s wills, which left him about 380,000 pounds. When it was discovered that he had forged this will, it triggered a much larger investigation. However, the desire for money is not believed to be his main motive, because an investigation of the records revealed that this forged will was an isolated case; he had

been killing his patients for years without any apparent monetary incentive.

Despite his consistent denials of guilt, in 2000 he was convicted and sentenced to 15 consecutive life sentences with recommendation of no release. Notably, he was the only doctor in British legal history to be found guilty of killing his patients. Dr. Shipman hanged himself in his cell at Wakefield Prison in West Yorkshire, England, on January 13, 2004.

So why did he do it? BBC News recently released a report examining why he may have done it but essentially gave up trying to understand his motive.

He has never revealed anything about the extent of his murderous career, and probably never will. . . . The experience of killing was personal and private to him, and he is never going to give that up. . . . We are never going to know the truth.

The best guess is from some of those present when he was tried in Preston Crown Court. They claimed that he likely “enjoyed exercising the power over life and death.”

This explanation probably doesn’t seem satisfactory to most readers, but the truth is that many serial killers kill simply because they enjoy it. A large part of that enjoyment is the power–control factor they hold over their victims. Fortunately, there are not many doctors who feel this way. But doctors are people, too. And where you have people, you will have killers.

Although this high-profile case is not specifically linked to any theories described in this chapter, it is presented here because the Father of Criminology, Lombroso, was also a medical doctor. In fact, it was during one of his criminal autopsies that he formulated his theoretical model.

#### THINK ABOUT IT:

1. What was the basic method of operation for Harold Shipman in how he killed his victims? This would make him what type or category of serial killer?
2. What is the best guess for why he committed his many killings?