

BOOK REVIEW

Kim A. Collins,¹ M.D.

Review of: *Healthcare Crime: Investigating Abuse, Fraud, and Homicide by Caregivers*

REFERENCE: Pyrek KM. *Healthcare crime: investigating abuse, fraud, and homicide by caregivers*. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2011, 314 pp.

“Healthcare Crime.” The term evokes many different images as follows: nursing home maltreatment, illegal prescriptions of controlled substances, and false claims for payment. However, many other types of health care crime against patients, coworkers, employers, and the public at large exist in today’s society. Crimes committed in the health care environment are not necessarily novel, but they are disturbing as their frequency continues to increase. “Healthcare institutions are supposed to be places of healing, not houses of horror” (p. xiii). The author is an investigative journalist, but the work is not a sensationalist product that points the finger solely at the health care industry. The book is objective, thorough, and focused. The author divides health care crime into four broad categories as follows: (i) exploitation, (ii) fraud, (iii) abuse, and (iv) murder. All of the crimes involve a preventable breach of personal trust surrounded by skepticism, creating a challenging topic for the author.

The book begins with a methodical discussion on the uniqueness of the health care environment and segues into workplace violence and occupational stressors. Current information on the U.S. health care industry including labor statistics provides the reader with the foundation to understand the opportunities and scenarios surrounding health care crime, the four categories, victims, and perpetrators. The underreporting and often disbelief that such crimes can and do occur in the health care setting is introduced and explored. Why does the public have such a difficult time accepting the fact that these crimes take place? Why do health care professionals restrain from prosecuting one of their own? The disbelief that surrounds alleged health care crimes and the often disappointing outcome when a bold individual becomes a whistle blower are analyzed. Exploitation of the patient is the focus on this section, and the author asks, “Is patient privacy a fallacy?” (p. 42). Breach of privacy including falsification and “stealing” of personal identity, misappropriation of financial records, Internet improprieties, medical record “snooping,” unauthorized distribution of photographs, and other corrupt practices are covered.

The book then expands to further examine the victims and perpetrators of health care crimes. Not surprisingly, the typical victim is a patient, disabled, under psychiatric care, or elderly. The typical

perpetrator is a physician (psychiatrists and pediatricians are further discussed), dentist, nurse, or nursing assistant. The typical scenarios involve long-term health care facilities, patients under anesthesia, or relationships that cross caregiver–patient boundaries.

The author then takes the reader out of the typical and into the atypical, unexpected, and often underreported. Most hospital deaths are owing to the natural causes and/or follow an expected clinical course. Yet, how accurate are the data and how carefully are hospital/health care setting deaths investigated? Suspicious deaths and homicides are depicted in a single chapter that begins with statistics on the number of employees who have routine patient contact with significant opportunities to gain access to medical procedures. “Prolific killers” who were health care professionals and several notorious serial murderers are described. The inclusion of this information in the book is not for sensationalism or just to hook the reader. As presented, the history is captivating, delving into the who, where, when, why, and how behind the murders. Review of legal documentation and forensic criminology results in a compelling discussion of such deaths and mortality patterns in the health care environment. The mechanics of the medical murder including why certain patients are targets, methods of the murders, suspicious signs, and theories behind why such murders occur are scrutinized.

The book appropriately branches off into medical fraud with supporting citations such as U.S. Senate testimony, Congressional legislation, and statistical reports. Home health care fraud, forgery, drug substitution, and medical identity theft for insurance benefits are but a few of the areas examined. Disturbing current figures of the dollars lost each year to fraud and fraudulent claims are provided. Features of the U.S. health care system that contribute to fraud such as the fee for service structure, highly automated claims processing systems, intricacies of regulations, and the immense size and complexity of the payor system which includes Medicare, Medicaid, and numerous insurance companies allow the reader to better appreciate the complexity of medical fraud. However, such fraud is not only committed by health care providers but also, alarmingly, by organized criminal groups.

The book fittingly concludes with an in-depth discussion regarding the detection, prosecution, and prevention of health care crimes. How can our system, on a small or large scale, be reformed to prevent such crimes? First, recognizing the problem is long standing. Once acknowledged, the shortcomings must be properly addressed and accountability imparted. Finally, a united effort focused on quality improvement and patient safety undertaken. To end the

¹1333 Martins Point Road, Wadmalaw Island, SC 29487.

book with such philosophical statements would be a disappointment, but fortunately this is not the case. Instead, the author discusses health care crime investigations and potential obstacles one might encounter. Legal landmarks such as the Elder Justice Act, Nursing Home Transparency and Improvement Act, and the Patient Safety and Abuse Prevention Act serve as resources and models for change. Concrete and realistic interventions are suggested. Instructive renovations and feasible strategies are clearly conveyed, allowing the reader to envision and facilitate change.

Recommendations to tackle the deficiencies and assess the care-taker competencies are also included.

In summary, the book is interesting and pertinent. The author's writing style is energetic and focused, encouraging the reader to leave the comfort zone of denial and face the realization of health care crime. The book's references are current and take the reader from peer-reviewed medical and scientific journals to the floor of the U.S. Congress. I recommend this book to those in the health care fields, forensic sciences, law enforcement, and justice system.