

## THE CASE OF LUCY LETBY

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### Abstract

In general, whenever we think of the term ‘serial killer’, we tend to associate it being a male. This is because we tend to link this with males having higher levels of innate aggression and violent thresholds. Therefore, when a female commits such an act, society attempts to try to understand why they commit such crimes. However 1 in 6 serial killers are female. Their crimes go undetected longer than males due to the ‘cultural denial’ of women, not being seen as highly aggressive. Every so often in the field of Forensic Psychology, a crime is committed which shakes society to its core. The most recent case to be added to the list, is the case of a young nurse in the UK called Lucy Letby.

### Britain’s worst baby killer

Nurse Lucy Letby aged 33 is guilty of murdering 7 newborns and trying to kill 6 others. She will spend the rest of her life in prison. Police fear there may be more tiny victims. She preyed on premature infants from June 2015 to June 2016 at the Countess of Chester Hospital and police officers found no motives for her crimes. Det Supt Paul Hughes, who led the investigation, said only one person can give us the answers, and that is Lucy Letby. I don’t think we will ever know unless she decides to tell us. Senior medics raised concerns about Letby a year before she was finally taken off the neonatal ward. No babies died when she was removed from the unit and the police were called in May 2017. The Government has now ordered an independent inquiry into the case.

### Childhood

An only child. Born in Hereford, January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1990. Her father (John, 77) was an ex-furniture salesman, and her mother (Susan, 63) a retired accounts clerk. They attended every day of the court trial. In her personal life, Letby said she sometimes found her loving parents’ affections suffocating. One former classmate said “Lucy was quiet but lovely. She was a very kind person so to think she is involved in this is hard to believe, no one can believe”.

### The dream. To become a Nurse

Lucy Letby always wanted to work with children and become a nurse, and after graduating in 2011 she became the poster girl in 2013 for the hospital’s Baby grow Appeal for the neonatal unit. She told newspapers; “My role involves caring for a wide range of babies. Some are here for days, others months and I enjoy seeing them progress and supporting their families”. In 2015 she was pictured with staff when the appeal reached £1.5 million. She lived in the hospital’s accommodation and was hard working and did extra shifts to save for a deposit for a house near the hospital. Eventually moving into her 3-bedroom semi-detached home with a neat garden and climbing roses, she had achieved her dream of independence. The kitchen notice board was full of family photos and notes, one said “Number 1 Godmother Award to Lucy Letby. There was a birthday card from her cats Tigger and Smudge. She kept cuddly toys in her bedroom including Winnie the Pooh and Eeyore. Fairy lights hung over her bed with the words ‘sweet dreams’ and prints on

the wall had the words “Leave Sparkles Wherever You Go” and “Shine Like a Diamond.”

### **The trial**

The trial lasted 10 months. She just said to medics, that the deaths were “just a run of bad luck”. She injected air and insulin into infants’ bodies and over-fed them with milk and usually carried out the crimes on night shifts. She even sent cards to the children’s parents saying, “sorry for your loss”. She targeted her final victims – two baby boys after returning from holiday in Ibiza she texted a pal saying: “Probably be back in with a bang lol”. A note found at Letby’s home after her arrest was covered in scrawls including the words: “I am evil, I did this”. The killer nurse had also written: “I don’t deserve to live. I killed them on purpose because I’m not good enough. I am a horrible evil person”. There were also the words hate, circled in black ink. However, Ben Mayers KC, defending, claimed at her trial it was not a confession but an “anguished outpouring”. In another note she had written: “I haven’t done anything wrong, why has this happened”.

### **Souvenirs**

A hoard of 257 shift handover sheets which should not have left the hospital were found in both her home and that of her parents. Professor of Criminology David Wilson states; “Murderers like Letby have a God-like craving to decide who should live and die. It only finds an outlet when they are among those who are weak, ill and defenseless”.

### **Offender Profile**

In her recent book, Professor Harrison found that in the USA, 40% of female serial killers were Nurses, likely to be White, probably Christian, Average looking and in their 20s or 30s when their crimes started. From her sample of 64 female serial killers, she found that 54% had murdered children. Many of these factors apply to Letby., Also, regarding the Modus Operandi, males are happier using brute force and more violent means such as shooting, stabbing, bludgeoning, or beating to death. Whereas females are more likely to kill by poisoning, drowning or suffocating.

### **The Psychological viewpoint**

Throughout the trial she always professed her innocence. Letby was given 14 whole-life sentences and refused to attend the final sentencing in court. This raised the question; should criminals be forced into court to hear the judges finally summary.

Behavioural psychologist Jo Hemmings claims that she got sadistic pleasure from liking these babies and undoubtedly born a psychopath. Forensic Psychiatrist Dr Das does not believe Letby is suffering from psychosis and that she knew what she was doing was wrong. Dr Ramsland also agrees, stating that Letby doesn’t seem psychotic, so would likely have some sense of her behaviour and the way society evaluates it. Whether she would feel remorse is a different question. Sometimes healthcare workers get depressed or stressed and harm patients to relieve stress or feel empowered. In which case, medication and therapy might help to improve their behaviour. However, if they are highly predatory, they are unlikely to respond well to treatment.

### **Neuropsychology and the serial killer**

Research into serial murders is in its infancy. There are links to neurodevelopment disorders such as autism spectrum disorder or head injury. However, there is a lack of rigorous studies and most of the literature is anecdotal and speculative. Is there a serial

killer genotype? No. However, there are links relating to high heritability in violent behaviour. Also, maltreatment in childhood, including sexual abuse, increases risk to later psychopathology and the influence of Epigenetics - (changes in gene expression).

### **Conclusion**

Lucy Letby spent a total of 14 days in the witness box, amounting to 60 hours, but we did not get any clearer to understanding her true self. Although Psychology can offer insights relating to trying to explain human behaviour, and indeed in many cases providing treatment programmes, when it comes to crimes of this nature and scale, we still must accept our limitations as a subject matter. One thing we can be certain of is that Letby will have plenty of time to reflect on her behaviour in prison.

### **References**

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