

Killing at Australian abortion clinic raises disturbing questions

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More than a month after a gunman shot and killed a security guard at a Melbourne abortion clinic, police have been reportedly unable to identify the murderer, who remains in prison awaiting a further court appearance on November 20.

The killing shocked doctors, women's groups and ordinary people nationwide. It was the first at an abortion clinic in Australia, where doctors have been able to legally terminate unwanted pregnancies since the early 1970s.

From its inception in 1972, the Fertility Control Clinic has been subjected to right-wing and religious anti-abortion demonstrations and occasional threats, requiring the presence of a security guard at the entrance, but until last month no one had tried to kill doctors or staff members.

Shortly after 10am on July 16 an unidentified man entered the premises and threatened clinic workers with a rifle, terrifying the 30 people in the waiting room. Two young men struggled with the gunman as, according to witnesses, he shot guard Steven Rogers, 44, in the face. Finally, the two men wrestled the assailant to the ground and disarmed him.

Rogers, a Chubb Security Services employee who had only worked at the clinic for three weeks, was dead by the time an ambulance arrived. Police arrested the attacker and seized a rifle.

The two men's bravery may have prevented a far greater loss of life. The gunman had supplies of kerosene and ammunition with him, together with two homemade steel clamps, designed to slip over door handles and prevent escape from any fire. The clamps fitted the two doors at the clinic, suggesting that he had information about its layout.

Police have charged the man with murder, but he carried no identification and has refused to give his name or make a statement. At his initial court hearing, he was referred to

as "the person unknown" and "John Doe". Responding to police appeals for help in identifying the man, residents of a small rural town in western New South Wales have suggested that he may be a recluse, who lived in a bush camp close to the town. Police have refused to confirm the identification however.

Given the accused's silence, it is not possible to state with certainty his motives. Nevertheless, whether he is a supporter of anti-abortion groups or a deranged individual, his act reflects a political atmosphere in which extreme right-wing zealots and Christian fundamentalists have become more aggressive, and received encouragement in ruling circles.

The Fertility Control Clinic is symbolic of the past struggles waged for the basic democratic right to abortion. The late Dr Bertram Wainer established it as Melbourne's first private clinic for abortions and pregnancy advice after exposing entrenched police corruption involving the extortion of bribes from abortion doctors to avoid prosecution.

Before 1972, many women seeking abortions, particularly working class women lacking the means to pay expensive fees, were forced into the hands of illegal backyard operators. Today, clinics such as Wainer's make it possible for women to have unwanted pregnancies terminated without paying upfront fees, under the Medicare health system.

A group known as the Helpers of God's Precious Infants has staged daily protests outside the Melbourne clinic for the past seven years, harassing patients with techniques ranging from strident prayers to waving plastic models of aborted fetuses. A spokesman for the group, Ben O'Brien, pointedly refused to condemn the murder. "We believe that violence begets violence," he told the media. "It's hardly surprising that abortion leads to acts of violence."

Likewise, David Forster, a founding member of the

Australian chapter, equated abortion with murder. “Steve was one of a number who lost their lives in that place during the day. The rest were unborn babies,” he commented. Forster revealed how closely his group monitors the clinic, stating that 15 women had entered the premises that morning.

A leading Right to Life spokeswoman Margaret Tighe was afforded considerable media coverage and permitted to write several opinion pieces. While formally expressing regret at the security guard’s death, she essentially justified his murder. “[The clinic] is a place of immense violence and it is little wonder that this has occurred. Some people will take the law into their own hands. Given the nature of what occurs in these places, it is a wonder there have not been any more of these incidents,” she stated.

Speaking on behalf of the clinic’s management and staff, Susie Allanson warned of the implications of these statements: “In attempting to use this tragedy to perpetuate their own fanatical agenda, they have not only condoned this unprecedented violence, but also appear intent on inciting other individuals to violence.”

One of Dr Wainer’s former associates, Dr David Grundmann, president of the International Society of Abortion Doctors, pointed to the situation in the United States, where two of his colleagues had been murdered and two wounded. “All the US doctors I know wear a bullet-proof vest to work. One has built his home into a fortress and has a loaded handgun in each operating theatre. He’s not paranoid; he views the threat seriously. There has always been protest at every site I’ve been involved with, and some fear of violence, though not overt. This is an alarming stepping-up.”

In the US, anti-abortion crusaders have invaded hundreds of clinics, blocked entrances, chained themselves to furniture, pushed and struck patients, tracked people to their homes, committed vandalism and harassed people with obscene phone calls and letters. Doctors have been murdered and staff terrorised.

Attacks of this scale have not yet occurred in Australia, but anti-abortion groups maintain links with their American counterparts. Jo Wainer, Bertram Wainer’s widow, revealed that leading US anti-abortionist Joseph Scheidler had been brought to Australia to lead previous demonstrations against the Fertility Control Clinic. Scheidler, a former Benedictine monk, has expressed support for torching clinics, declaring: “I am not going to weep tears over a charred abortion clinic.”

Christian fundamentalist groups have received

increasing backing in Australian government circles in recent years. The Lyons Forum, a grouping of MPs committed to promoting Christian morality, is believed to count 15 Howard government ministers as members.

In 1997, the Forum proposed a ban on Medicare funding for abortions, but apparently realised that it would have little public support. Forum secretary Kevin Andrews remarked that such a campaign “is not sustainable in the present climate”. Opinion polls indicate 65 percent approval for abortion, a 10 percentage point rise in recent years.

Two years later, Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock ordered the harassment of three American abortion doctors visiting Australia for a conference. One, Dr Warren Hern of Colorado, was detained at the airport and threatened with the loss of his visa. Ruddock acted at the request of the so-called World Federation of Doctors who Respect Human Life, whose patron is Lyons Forum member and former government minister, John Herron.

Just last November, another leading government figure, National Party Senator Julian McGauran, denounced Melbourne’s Royal Womens Hospital in federal parliament for performing what he claimed were late-term abortions. He called for the hospital to be prosecuted and for changes to the criminal law to more explicitly prohibit such abortions.

Similarly, Roman Catholic leaders, including Archbishop George Pell, together with independent Senator Brian Harradine, have sponsored “Freedom to be Born” street demonstrations and denounced women for having abortions.

Taken together, these religious partisans are responsible for creating the political climate, in which small groups of rightwing fanatics can contemplate violent attacks on abortion clinics—all in the name of Christian morality.



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