

Historical keyword

Infanticide

Derived from the Latin *infanticidium* and incorporated into English by the 17th century, infanticide was initially used to describe the practice of abandoning or killing children shortly after birth—a form of family limitation that was supposedly sanctioned by certain ancient and tribal communities but eventually outlawed by Christianity. It was rarely used, however, and when in the 18th century legislators and doctors became pre-occupied with the murders of illegitimate children by unmarried mothers, the more awkward term “newborn child murder” became more popular in law manuals, medical treatises, and court records. When the term did arise in English medical works it appeared only in renditions of continental European sources, where it bore the same meaning as phrases used routinely in English courts to specify the murder of a child at, or just after, birth.

In the early 19th century, however, as professional interest in medical jurisprudence deepened, the term infanticide became fashionable on both sides of the Atlantic. Generally regarded as synonymous with newborn child murder, infanticide was used with increasing frequency by contributors to *The Times* and appeared in Walter Scott’s novel, *The Heart of Midlothian*, in 1818. The term also featured prominently in such medical texts such as J B Beck’s *An Inaugural Dissertation on Infanticide* (1817) and W B Ryan’s *Infanticide: Its Law, Prevalance, Prevention and History* (1862).

Concerns about the murder of children during the baby-farming scandals in the UK during the late 1860s and 1870s, and anxieties about child murder by indigenous populations in colonial settings, served to broaden the meaning of the term. Increasingly, infanticide was applied to the killing, neglect, or abuse of newborn babies and older children in various domestic, institutional, and geographical locations. It was, on occasion, also used to describe the infanticidal woman herself.

After several sensational trials of women for killing their children while suffering from puerperal insanity, the UK Infanticide Acts of 1922 and 1938 attempted to define the term more strictly. According to the 1938 Act, which remains in force, a woman can be convicted of infanticide only if she kills her own child aged under 12 months and if she has not recovered from the effects of giving birth or lactation. The definition of infanticide, and indeed the fate of women accused of this crime, therefore resides largely in the hands of the medical profession.

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Lifeline

Ram Sasisekharan is a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, USA, and has been in the forefront of the emerging discipline of biological engineering. His research group is studying the extracellular matrix with an ultimate goal of developing new pharmacological approaches to alleviate disease processes mediated by the extracellular matrix. He has founded biotechnology companies and is an adviser to various research institutes, including the Princess Chulabhorn Research Institute, Thailand.



Donna Coover/MIT

What has been the greatest achievement of your career?
Translating ideas into a reality that leads to drug development.

And the greatest embarrassment?
Being told as a student that translational research was a “soft” science.

What do you think is the most over-hyped field of science or medicine at the moment?
Genomics.

And the most neglected?
Alternative medicine.

What do you think is the greatest political danger to the scientific profession?
Using religious beliefs to thwart scientific investigation—for example, in stem cell research.

Who is your favourite politician and why?
Jawaharlal Nehru, because of his bold vision for education that transformed the educational base for the Indian subcontinent.

Who was your most influential teacher, and why?
My father, he made me appreciate the power of intuition.

What would be your advice to a newly qualified doctor?
Question the dogma.

What is the best piece of advice you have received, and from whom?
“Focus on your strengths and know your limitations. Striving for excellence is an act of faith”, from my mother.

What is your greatest fear?
Seeing a younger generation who seem to embrace a value system in which playing ball is considered more important than saving our planet.

What is your worst habit?
Checking email too often.

What was your first experiment as a child?
Studying mosquitoes for a project I did on malaria when I was 9 years old.

With which historical figure do you most identify?
Mahatma Gandhi.