



MDs are living in dangerous times, security consultant warns

Anne Mullens

Anne Mullens is a freelance writer in Victoria.

Canadian doctors who perform therapeutic abortions must take steps to protect themselves as the anniversaries of the shootings of 3 Canadian physicians approach, a Vancouver-based personal-security expert says.

Robert Burns of CANPRO Pacific Services, who provides advice and protection for clients ranging from CEOs to Hollywood stars, says physicians who provide any abortions in Canada should be wary this month. At a minimum, they should take "serious steps" to ensure their personal safety and the safety of their staff and family during the time surrounding Remembrance Day. He offers the warning because whoever is behind the sniper-style shooting of 3 doctors in the past 4 years has yet to be caught.

"I am convinced that another attempt will be made by the person or persons who has or have carried out attacks on doctors in the past," says Burns. His clients now include some obstetricians/gynecologists who have received threats.

Burns, who has 14 years' experience protecting clients, now has 20 employees, most of them retired police officers. In 1994 the British Columbia Ministry of the Attorney General hired him to study the security risks facing abortion providers and abortion facilities in the province. That experience left him concerned that *anyone* connected to the provision of abortion services may be targeted by extremists. "When strong ideology combines with desperation, watch out," he warns.

The attacks that have taken place in Canada have been remarkably similar. Burns says that while the perpetrator is most likely to stick to the same *modus operandi*, subsequent attacks could differ. He warns doctors to be alert for letter bombs, attacks at work, on the street and while in their cars. "I don't want people to become paranoid, but being aware and prepared is important to thwarting an attack."

Burns says 4 critical steps must be in place for a perpetrator to plan and carry out an attack, and any disruption of these steps will prevent it from taking place. An assailant must be able to find and positively identify the person, and then he must be able to follow the person's movements to determine the best time to strike. Finally, he must carry out the attack.

If you make yourself a more difficult target, says Burns, a would-be attacker will likely look for an easier



Police investigate the scene at the Winnipeg home of Dr. Jack Fainman, 66, who was shot in the shoulder while sitting in his home on Nov. 11, 1997.

one. He offers several suggestions for thwarting potential attackers; additional tips were provided in an earlier edition of *CMAJ* (1998;159:987-9).

Burns says physicians who think they are at risk should have unlisted phone numbers and should not use custom licence plates, and they should get a shredder instead of throwing personal papers in the garbage or recycling box. They should not allow their picture to be published and they should vary their daily routine by taking different routes to and from work. Burns also advises physicians who may be at risk to carry a cellular phone at all times so that it will be easy to call for help.

His additional advice includes getting a dog at home, since dogs provide one of the best early-warning systems, and installing motion-detection lights on outside walls and a fence around the yard.

Unlike CEOs, who are often protected by layers of security, the very nature of medicine means that doctors must constantly interact with the public. Burns says physicians must strike a balance between being secure and being accessible. Common precautions could include installing a camera at entrances and instructing staff to be on the lookout for suspicious individuals.

Some of Burns' clients, when faced with a long list of recommended security precautions, tell him they would rather face the risks than the constraints on their freedom. However, most of Burns' female clients don't have a problem adopting personal security measures. "Many of them tell me they do much of it already. Most women spend a lifetime being wary of situations in which they are vulnerable, and easily adopt a few more steps."