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Lethal injection

At midday after the execution the sky turned black and the sun, eclipsed by the moon, became a slender blazing crescent, assuredly a portentous omen. During the night groups of rowdy young people had gathered outside the prison, carrying placards, heckling, and arguing vehemently both sides of the question. The condemned man had spent the day smoking cigars, huddling with lawyers, then going to mass and having his last meal. At the appointed hour of midnight there was a slight hitch when the pancuronium and pentothal precipitated in the tubing, requiring the needle to be replaced. About 10 minutes later the notorious John Gacy went quietly to his last sleep.

I remember seeing him at the hospital in the late 'seventies. A large flabby man, he was being taken down in the elevator to "rule out myocardial infarction" in intensive care. In this regard he did not differ from the hundreds of other people who each year are "being ruled out," as our intern called it the other day, though even our elevator driver would be able to diagnose most of them as having non-cardiac pain. Nor was there anything unusual in his trying at the time to escape to a more congenial environment. The girls from the house of correction during my internship did the same thing by inserting bobby pins under their skin. More recently two hemophilic prisoners were found to be regularly developing hemarthroses after playing football in the prison yard, and then being admitted repeatedly for treatment with large and expensive doses of antihemophilic globulin.

Now Mr. Gacy's only claim to fame was that by 1978 he had murdered 33 young people by garroting or stabbing them and then burying their dismembered bodies in his yard. But unlike the young American who got his four lashes promptly for spray painting expensive cars in Singapore, this man lived on in prison for 14 years at an estimated cost to the taxpayers of \$880 000, including legal fees. During this time he provided employment for a whole tribe of lawyers, who fought tenaciously in many courts until everybody had just about forgotten his name and his crime.

In April he reappeared briefly in a blaze of publicity, as his legal marathon drew to a close. To be sure, his devoted lawyers fired off a few more last minute appeals, which were rejected. Then a group of doctors joined the legal fray by insisting that they should not have to be present at the execution. They were right of course, considering that Joan of Arc, Mary Stuart, Charles the First, Louis XVI. Marine Antoinette, and even the Romanovs managed without medical help. Why force them to compete, in these days of managed competition, in the traditionally exclusive domain of the hangman and the priest, busy as many of these doctors are "ruling out MI" in intensive care units all over the country.

By now all that is left of Mr. Gacy are unpleasant memories and his brain, which scientists at the University of Chicago are studying in the hope of finding clues to his abnormal behavior. Meanwhile, as 154 other people are waiting their turn on death rows in Illinois, the arguments for and against the death penalty are sure to continue. This year, however, they are being carried out by a public increasingly impatient with the politicians' failure to rein in the violence in America's streets. On this note, the author of one of the daily newspaper editorials wrote that he hoped that this man's 33 young victims were resting a little more peacefully today.