

'Just your average neighbours'

The Leytons were considered an 'ideal family' — until all four members died violently this week. JOE SCAVO TONY HORWITZ, MARK FORBES and PILITA CLARK report

WHILE mentally disturbed psychiatrist Harold Leyton was making plans to kill his family, his wife was defending his strange behaviour.

While he was secretly buying a .22 rifle and talking of his plans, his friends and colleagues kept quiet about his illness.

While neighbours were assuming the family was living in suburban comfort, Dr Leyton was torturing himself over the professional and financial mess he had created.

And while his family lay sleeping early last Tuesday morning, he rose from his bed, took the rifle from its hiding place and shot his wife and their two sons. Shortly afterwards, he slashed his wrists with surgical precision.

He was found lying on his back in the kitchen of the luxury Pymble home — a home they could not afford. Later that week they were due to move into a semi-detached house in Chatswood, formerly the doctor's office.

It is this comedown on the social scale and a sexual harassment charge brought against him by a former patient which probably triggered off Dr Leyton's actions, police say.

Full details are unknown, but this picture emerges from police reports: Last Monday night, the two boys, Aaron, 12, and Marcus, 10, were put to bed. The parents stayed up, probably packing their belongings to take to their new home. Unwashed cups and dishes were in the kitchen sink, suggesting a late-night snack.

The parents went to bed and sometime that night, Dr Leyton woke. It is not known whom he shot first. His wife, Gail, 38, and Aaron were shot in the back of the head as they lay on their beds. Marcus was near his left eye as he slept on his back.

Dr Leyton made his way downstairs to the family room and slashed his wrists with a hard-backed razor, such as that used in offices for cutting paper.

As a doctor he knew exactly where to cut to do the most damage and it is because of the large amount of blood found in the family room that police believe that is where he initiated his suicide.

He then walked through many of the rooms before he reached the kitchen. Police say the kitchen was splattered with blood and it appeared Dr Leyton staggered and fell against cupboards and other objects before collapsing on to the floor.

A blood-stained cricket bat was also found in the kitchen, but forensic tests revealed this was not used as a murder weapon.

DETECTIVES are still puzzled by Dr Leyton's movements before he reached the kitchen and by signs of an unsuccessful attempt to burn the \$650,000 house: the carpet is scorched and there was a smell of gas and petrol fumes. The murder weapon — the .22 rifle — has not been found.

About 2.30 the following afternoon, the doctor's father-in-law went to the home because he was worried. Marcus, 10, Sydney Grammar Preparatory School, had rung the doctor's secretary to report that Marcus had not attended school that day.

The secretary, who had worked for the doctor for 14 years, was also concerned that her boss had not kept appointments at his hired consulting rooms at the Sydney Clinic in Mowbray Road, Chatswood.

It was she who confronted the doctor last May over his purchase of the .22 rifle, in March. He told her that he had broken the gun into bits and thrown it away.

He obtained a shooter's licence last December — two months after revealing to a fellow psychiatrist he was considering killing his wife and children.

He was being treated for manic depression, but a psychiatrist who knew him said only people who were "fairly close to him" knew of his condition.



The luxury home in Alma Street, Pymble, that the Leytons could not afford, with inset, from top left, Marcus, 10; Gail, 38; Aaron, 12, and Dr Harry Leyton.

“A psychiatrist told the *Herald* Dr Leyton showed no obvious signs of being disturbed. “I have a lot of patients who talk about suicide but only about one in a thousand actually do it,” he said. “It’s always easy to be wise after the event.”

have lost a large sum of money playing the foreign exchange market.

A psychiatrist told the *Herald* that in some extreme depressions the sufferer could believe there was no way out other than suicide. This would include the killing of his family as an act of love.

The financial problems and the sexual harassment charge could have confirmed to Dr Leyton a conviction that there was no escape other than through death.

“These two things coupled together had a very unsettling effect on him,” investigating officer Detective Sergeant Warren Cole said. “He was a self-made man and worked his way up from nothing.”

An only child, Dr Leyton emigrated from Belgium with his mother, who died several years ago. He graduated from Sydney University and married in 1965. Mrs Leyton, 10 years his junior, was a teenager when they wed.

“As far as she was concerned he was the head of the household and all the business transactions were up to him,” Sergeant Cole said. “Up until last October he was a very successful businessman.”

About that time he sold the family's Castle Cove home for \$330,000 and moved to the Alma Street, Pymble, mansion, complete with swimming

pool and tennis court. A few months later he was forced to put it on the market and to move his practice into rented chambers at Chatswood.

People involved in these transactions describe Dr Leyton as difficult, anxious and very stressed. “He was pretty anxious for a quick sale. He was acting very strange, very anxious,” said a real estate agent. The doctor had hinted at problems but would not elaborate.

The psychiatrist who was treating Dr Leyton would not comment. The doctor was involved in numerous property deals and is believed to

workers described the psychiatrist as a pleasant, unassuming man.

“He came in last Friday same as always,” said a woman at the inquiry desk. “He smiled and waved at me. That was all. There was never anything flamboyant about him.”

By Thursday Dr Leyton's brass nameplate had been removed from the office building's facade and his name has been crossed out in the elevator and at the inquiries desk.

Next door at the Red Rose Espresso Restaurant, owner Brenda Grose said Dr Leyton often came in for a cup of coffee before seeing patients.

“I’d just say ‘hello, doctor,’ and he’d say hello to me,” she said. “He was a quiet, respectful man. You’d never know anything was wrong.”

Mrs Marilyn Cole, a music teacher who lived near the Leytons in Castle Cove, described them as “your average suburban neighbours ... an ideal family.”

“You would have a cup of tea or coffee and a chat, but they wouldn’t show their problems. There was no indication at all of what would happen.”

“As a next-door neighbour we discussed our children and the house and so on, but it would have been in bad taste to mention any family problems. And she was a nice girl, she always was in good taste.”

Another neighbour said: “Our boys used to play together, they were such nice kids, it rocked us all, we can’t understand it. You feel as if it could happen to anyone if it happened to them.”

Mrs Leyton was an award-winning cook and had resumed university studies. She also had served as president of the mothers’ club at Castle Cove Primary School.

Dr Leyton, a fitness enthusiast, was often seen riding his bike with the boys. The family also shared a love of music — Dr Leyton played the flute, Aaron the tenor saxophone and Marcus was a talented singer and trumpeter.

Marcus had tried out for the Sydney Youth Orchestra a few days before his death, according to his old bandmaster at Castle Cove.

Dr Leyton had played in the Late Starters, a Castle Cove band, but had not been coming since they moved to Pymble. His children played in another band organised by his father’s bandmaster.

“The kids at school were crying most of the day when they heard what had happened, in fact they have started collecting his work for a special memorabilia book.”

“They’ve done it all by themselves, the teachers haven’t had anything to do with it. I think that shows what sort of a boy (Marcus) he was.”

Aaron was in the first form at Sydney Grammar, where he is remembered for his interest in cricket, soccer and playing the saxophone. One of Aaron’s best friends, Tom Middlemost, said the Leytons “just seemed like any normal family”.

“They used to go out ice skating and bowling, but mostly they stayed inside,” said Tom, who spent the night at the Leytons on several occasions.

“I thought they were real high up — I mean real rich — because they kept moving from mansion to mansion.”

THE reason for the moving was the dire financial state of the family and the cars parked at the Pymble home told a truer picture — an old Volvo in poor condition and dented late-model SAAB.

Tom, 12, said Dr Leyton “seemed a bit formidable at first” but that he became warmer as time went on. “He obviously loved them,” he said of the doctor’s relationship with his family.

Tom last saw Aaron on Monday afternoon, when they and another classmate walked to Town Hall together to catch the train home after school.

“I got off at Wollstonecraft and Aaron stayed on to go to Pymble. That’s the last I saw of him.”

Students were told of the murder at a school assembly yesterday, but on Thursday, Aaron’s classmates said most students already knew.

Tom Middlemost said fellow students were collecting “souvenirs,” such as Aaron’s materials from woodwork-ing class.

Aaron was receiving instruction for his Bar Mitzvah, or Jewish confirmation, which was to have taken place in February. The boys attended Hebrew classes at the North Side Synagogue, although the Leyton family did not belong to the congregation.

“There was nothing at all about our association that suggested what was to happen,” said a rabbi familiar with the family. “Everything about them seemed completely normal and natural.”

The family will be buried on Monday at the Rookwood cemetery. Mrs Leyton is survived by her father, step-mother and brother. Dr Leyton is believed to have no remaining close relatives.