

Department of Pathology

"Multiple Fatality Management: The VT Experience"

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On April 16, 2007, on the Virginia Tech campus in Blacksburg, Virginia a mentally ill student killed 32 people and himself during two separate attacks two hours apart. Many more were wounded. It was the deadliest school shooting in US History.

The incident received international media coverage. Amongst the issues that sparked intense media and survivor attention were the management of the dead, gaps in the US system for treating mental illness and firearms control. Privacy laws and journalism ethics were also an issue and drew criticism. The incident prompted immediate changes in Virginia law that had allowed Cho, an individual adjudicated as mentally unsound, to purchase handguns. It also led to passage of the first major federal gun control measure in more than 13 years, a law that strengthens the National Instant Criminal Background Check System, signed by President George W. Bush on January 5, 2008.

This presentation will discuss the Virginia Tech shootings from the point of view of the Medical Examiner System. Medical Examiner staff was charged by statute to care for the dead - starting with assessment of the scene, scientific documentation of personal identification, recognition and collection of forensic evidence, autopsy to document the details of injuries and to certification of the cause and manner of death.