

## **COLUMBINE: LEARNING FROM TRAGEDY**

Clif Cleaveland, MD

7 May 2009

Episodes of deadly violence have become almost commonplace in recent weeks. Each tragedy stimulates brief media coverage before the next shooting or stabbing supplants it. Any epidemic, including violence, must prompt us to comprehend it in hopes that we can reduce the chance for the next outbreak.

On April 20<sup>th</sup>, the tenth anniversary of the horrific disaster, *Columbine*, an investigative report by Dave Cullen was published. It is heart-breaking, meticulously researched, and necessary reading for parents, grandparents, first-responders, teachers, and school administrators.

One of the two assassins, Eric Harris, was a psychopath, a person with no conscience and a desire to inflict suffering. He planned the attack on his high school for more than a year. His partner, Dylan Klebold, suffered from persistent depression which took him on several occasions to the brink of suicide. He became essentially a robot controlled by his evil classmate.

These are some of the lessons to be gained from Columbine:

**Home and family:** Teenagers are too young to be cut loose from parental involvement. The Columbine killers each had routines seemingly isolated from the rules and responsibilities of their middle-class families. They were able to conceal weapons and bomb-making equipment in their rooms. They were able to sneak out repeatedly for midnight escapades of vandalism. Much of the time from their mid-teens onward, their families seemed to have no ideas where their sons were and what they might be doing. Harris had complete freedom of the internet to post frightening messages and threats. He was a detached boarder, not a member of a family.

**Teenage society:** This cannot function as a closed-system, independent from any rules of society. Friends and associates of the Columbine shooters knew of their threats, illegal gun purchases, and manufacture of pipe-bombs. Friends arranged purchases of the weapons that would be used in the murders. No one sounded an alarm. A sense of responsibility to the larger society must be taught repeatedly in homes, schools, and houses of worship.

**School safety:** An armed officer of the law must be a part of each middle and high school staff. We must take the same precautionary steps to prevent school violence that we take for airports and courthouses. Detailed disaster plans and communication networks must be in place and repeatedly rehearsed. Students and faculty in one part of the building had no idea what was transpiring in another. Students barricaded in classrooms gained sketchy information from live, televised reports.

**Communication among law-enforcement agencies:** A clearing house must be established where all data relating to juvenile offenders is reviewed. Police, school officials, and officers of the court each had information on the activities of the shooters that, if shared, could possibly have prevented the calamity

at Columbine. Complaints from a family whose son was repeatedly threatened by Harris were dismissed. A search warrant for Harris' room was filed away. A juvenile diversion program in the community was isolated from other arms of the legal system.

**Disaster planning:** Detailed, rehearsed plans for all eventualities in public safety must be in place. Hundreds of law-enforcement officers and medics raced to Columbine High School. No one entered the building until the shooting and bombings were over. A wounded teacher went unattended for three hours when he died. A precise command structure must be in place before a disaster so that competing agencies with overlapping authority do not neutralize each other.

**Independent post-event assessment:** The official report of the events at Columbine were not made public until more a year later. Files disappeared. Key investigators were not permitted to speak on the record. Rumors and myth gained the status of facts.

**Gun control:** One automatic weapon was bought illegally. Another was purchased at a gun-show by a girl friend. Shot-guns were easily procured, their barrels sawed-off, before being demonstrated to friends. Is there ever a need for a teenager to purchase combat weapons in any venue?

I urge you to read and to think about this book.