

## Role of antidepressants in killings needs review

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The murderous rampage that left 33 people dead at Virginia Tech has stirred countless emotions: sadness and anger, fear and hatred, grief and disgust.

When Dr. Ann Blake Tracy heard the details, she felt many of those same emotions. Yet there is one sentiment Tracy does not share with much of the rest of the world: surprise. As terrible as it sounds, after nearly 20 years researching links between violent crime, suicide and antidepressants, Tracy is surprised only that it doesn't happen more often.

Details continue to emerge about the lonely life of killer Seung-Hui Cho, who had a history of mental illness. Among Cho's effects, officials found prescription medications related to the treatment of psychological problems.

Though it's still premature to draw conclusions without toxicology results, these are the details Tracy, an author and the executive director of the International Coalition for Drug Awareness, expected from the moment she heard about the Virginia Tech shootings. In her experience, when it comes to investigating high-profile shootings, antidepressants are as common as the presence of loneliness, despondence and rage.

"I'm just so tired of seeing people die, I could scream," Tracy said during a phone interview. "It's happening daily in this country. It's so massive, it's just unreal. We've got so many school shootings now, I can't even begin to keep up with them all. And the reason is so incredibly obvious. You don't have to look at much to figure it out."

2006, Bailey, Colo. — Duane Morrison shot and killed a girl and sexually assaulted six others. Antidepressants were found in his vehicle.

2005, Red Lake Indian Reservation, Minn. — Jeff Weise shot and killed nine people and wounded five before committing suicide. Prozac.

1998, Springfield, Ore. — Kip Kinkel killed his parents, then went to school and opened fire in the cafeteria, killing two and wounding 22. Prozac.

1989, Stockton — Patrick Purdy used an assault rifle to spray bullets through a playground at Cleveland Elementary School, killing five children and wounding 29 people before he killed himself. Elavil.

## **'It's all so intertwined'**

There are dozens of other examples of violence at schools and the presence of antidepressants, but the carnage hardly is limited to our campuses. Countless families have been destroyed around the world through homicides and suicides committed by adults on antidepressants.

In June 2001, Texan Andrea Yates drowned her five children under the influence of four psychiatric medicines, including Effexor.

In February 2004 in Polk Township, Pa., Samantha Hirt, hours after taking a pill for manic depression, set fire in a bedroom where her two toddlers were playing, closed the door and sat on a sofa watching television while the fire spread, killing both children. Effexor.

Other famous cases include the 1998 deaths of actor Phil Hartman and his wife, a murder/suicide committed by her (Zoloft); the 1999 home and office killing spree by Atlanta day trader Mark Barton (Prozac); the 1998 shooting deaths of four co-workers by Connecticut lottery accountant Matthew Beck, who then killed himself (Luvox); and the 1994 New York City subway bombing by Edward Leary, which injured 48 (Prozac).

The list (which can be found at [www.drugawareness.org](http://www.drugawareness.org)) encompasses hundreds and hundreds of cases.

"You start linking them together and looking at all the similarities and you say, 'Good grief, it's all so intertwined,'" said Tracy, who has appeared on programs including "20/20," "Dateline" and "60 Minutes" and served as a consultant on high-profile cases including Columbine and Andrea Yates. "I keep asking, 'When is somebody going to see this?' But we've been so brainwashed about drugs, we think legal means safe.

"Most people don't know LSD once was prescribed as a wonder drug. Most people don't know that PCP was considered to have a large margin of safety in humans. Most people don't know ecstasy was prescribed and sold for five years to treat depression. Few know that history of drugs, and I think that's our biggest problem. We're just not educated enough to have concerns."

## **Prozac nation, indeed**

The Northern San Joaquin Valley certainly is not immune. Stanislaus County Coroner Kristi Herr, who has investigated hundreds of the county's 4,000 annual deaths, including many accidental overdoses of prescription medicines, said she regularly goes into homes of deceased people and finds medicine cabinets loaded with prescription medicines. Sometimes there are so many pill bottles that large garbage bags are needed to transport them all.

"It seems to me a large portion of our society is on antidepressants," Herr said. "That isn't

based on statistics. That is just based on my experience of going into homes and evaluating the cases that come through here."

In 2003, then-Newman resident Lorraine Slater's 14-year-old daughter, Dominique, killed herself after being treated for depression with several antidepressants, including Celexa and Wellbutrin. As her depression and erratic behavior worsened, her doctor prescribed her a double dose of Effexor. Fifteen days later, she was dead. Her body later was found in the Delta Mendota Canal in Patterson, not far from the family's home.

"On the drug, she became more agitated, combative and restless," Slater said. "And she had never been like that before. It's like our daughter was on LSD. It was a real Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde experience."

Shortly after Dominique's death, the FDA released a warning that one in 50 patients, or 2 percent, will experience an adverse reaction to Effexor, which can include suicidal thoughts.

Slater has become a consumer advocate working to raise awareness of possible dangers of antidepressants. On May 9, she will testify at a hearing at the state Capitol concerning a bill that would require drug companies to disclose results of all clinical trials.

"We're not against medication," Slater said. "We just want disclosure about results from their trials. In their internal memos, marketers are told to downplay the side effects, and a lot of doctors aren't aware of the real dangers."

"We're just saying these companies need to give the citizens they're supposedly trying to help the information about possible symptoms so people can make informed decisions. If their medicine is so good, what is there they have to hide?"

### **Arguments against link**

Of course, the logical argument against tying violent crimes to antidepressants is that there are countless factors that motivate a person to commit a violent act.

And those who carry out these deeds often are people with mental illness, so the presence of antidepressants can be expected. These are solid points; correlation does not in itself mean causation. And there is no doubting that countless people have benefited from these drugs.

Still, as one looks at the details of violent crimes around the country, too often there is an array of antidepressants. At the very least, this is a topic that deserves greater scrutiny.

In early 2005, the FDA issued a warning that antidepressants can cause both suicide and violence. The agency also mandated a black-box warning — the most serious available — that states these drugs can produce side effects that include anxiety, agitation, panic

attacks, irritability, hostility, aggressiveness, impulsivity and mania.

The FDA also has warned that abrupt withdrawal of antidepressants can produce suicide, psychosis or hostility.

Eli Lilly, which makes Prozac, repeatedly has denied claims that Prozac causes violence, even though the company's own documents acknowledge "nervousness, anxiety, self-mutilation and manic behavior" are among the "usual adverse effects" of the medicine.

It's the same Eli Lilly that has paid more than \$1.2 billion to 28,000 people who claimed they were injured by the drug Zyprexa during the past decade, according to a Jan. 5 article in the New York Times.

Paying \$1.2 billion over 10 years may sound like a lot of money until compared with the \$4.2 billion the company made last year alone selling Zyprexa, which has been taken by 20 million people worldwide since its introduction in 1996.

Most antidepressant drugs, including Prozac, Zoloft, Paxil, Luvox, Celexa, Lexapro and Effexor, are known as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, which alter brain chemistry in an attempt to manage depression.

Serotonin, a neurotransmitter, is a chemical that facilitates communication within the brain, allowing one to experience happy feelings upon its release. Essentially, the antidepressant drugs prevent reabsorption of serotonin in an attempt to make the happiness experience last longer.

### **Mother of a monster**

One of the former lead chemists at the National Institute of Health, whose work eventually led to the development of many antidepressant drugs, first spoke out against the drugs nearly 10 years ago.

"I am alarmed at the monster that Johns Hopkins neuroscientist Solomon Snyder and I created when we discovered the simple binding assay for drug receptors 25 years ago," said Dr. Candace Pert in the Oct. 20, 1997, issue of Time magazine.

She said Prozac and other SSRI (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor) antidepressants may cause heart problems and affect the entire body, where the vast majority of serotonin is produced.

The medical profession "ignores the body as if it exists merely to carry the head around," said Pert, who's now scientific director of RAPID Pharmaceuticals in Potomac, Md. "These molecules of emotion regulate every aspect of our physiology."

A recent study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that half of all Americans take at least one prescription drug, and that antidepressant use has nearly

tripled in the past decade. According to some estimates, 30 million Americans take antidepressants. FDA statistics show U.S. physicians issue more than 10 million antidepressant prescriptions each year to patients younger than 18. FDA-approved prescription drugs injure 2.2 million and kill at least 100,000 Americans each year, according to numerous published studies.

### **Some survive and forgive**

Problem is, when antidepressants don't work as intended, the harmful fallout isn't limited to the user. The victims often are those within striking distance. They are people like Mark Taylor, who was sitting outside and reading a Bible when he was shot numerous times by Eric Harris at Columbine High School.

"The first one hit me in the back of the leg. That was the shotgun blast," Taylor said in a recent phone interview. "That was the most painful. And then I got hit several more times in the chest; the bullets went right through me. They tried to make sure I was dead. I laid down and pretended I was dead.

"I think Eric Harris, from the medication, didn't really know what he was doing. I don't really hold him responsible for it. Eric and Dylan were both taking medicines. They just didn't seem to have any reaction to what they were doing. They were having fun with it, laughing and enjoying it and having a good time. I feel that antidepressants were the cause of the Columbine shooting."

Taylor, now 24, travels the country and speaks about the importance of forgiveness. Since the Virginia Tech shootings, he has been besieged with interview requests. His interviews included an appearance on "The Morning Show with Mike and Juliet," a national Fox News Network program. The hosts invited Taylor because they wanted to hear from someone who had survived a school shooting, someone who presumably could offer insight to help other children survive such an incident.

"Forgiveness," Taylor told them, "that's how I survived it."

But Taylor said the show's commentators weren't much interested in his message of forgiveness. Instead, the show focused on interviews with FBI agents and police tacticians, who offered survival tips that we are supposed to use to arm our children as we send them off to school.

Is this what it's come to? Do we now simply accept that frequent school shootings are a part of today's society and prepare ourselves for when tragedy strikes? Too often, instead of working to find the cause of problems, we react to symptoms. That same kind of thinking is what has so many Americans taking antidepressants in the first place.

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