

columbine

Autopsy: Sanders' neck wound likely fatal

By Kieran Nicholson

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Feb. 8, 2001 - Columbine High teacher Dave Sanders probably would have died from a gunshot wound to the neck even if he had received immediate medical attention, pathologists said Wednesday.

One of the two gunshots that hit Sanders during the Columbine massacre tore through his carotid artery, according to the summary of his autopsy report, which was released Wednesday.

Sanders, 48, was the only teacher killed in the April 20, 1999, rampage, in which 15 people died, including the two teenage gunmen.

"A partial transection of the carotid artery is almost always fatal," said R.K. Wright, a forensic pathologist and former coroner of Broward County, Fla. "Even if someone is attended to quickly, it is still a very, very serious wound. It is very, very hard to repair." Wright was one of two pathologists asked by The Denver Post to review the summary of Sanders' autopsy.

Sanders' family is suing the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, alleging that it took authorities almost four hours to reach the science room where Sanders lay bleeding.

Summaries of autopsy reports on 11 Columbine victims were released Wednesday under a court order issued last week. The full report on victim Daniel Rohrbough was released last week.

The county, at the request of victims' families, had sealed the reports, but The Denver Post fought for their release. The Post will not appeal the ruling to seek access to the full autopsy reports.

The full reports on victim Isaiah Shoels and killer Eric Harris had been released shortly after the shootings.

A gunshot to Sanders' head and neck ripped the carotid artery, which supplies blood flow to the brain, according to the summary.

The other bullet wound, through his back, tore his "right subclavian vein," according to the summary of the autopsy, performed by Dr. Michael Dobersen, the Arapahoe County coroner and medical examiner.

"It is my impression when you damage the internal carotid artery it is difficult to come back from that," said Dr. Robert Kurtzman, the Mesa County coroner. "It is extremely difficult, or perhaps impossible, to correct that. It is a severe injury and a common injury that results in death."

Peter Greiner, a Washington, D.C., attorney who represents Sanders' daughter, Angela, could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

While Jefferson County District Judge Brooke Jackson last week also ordered the release of gunman Dylan Klebold's autopsy summary, it has yet to be released pending a possible appeal.