Specialized Multiple Burial Techniques: Reality Versus Myth. The European Perspective

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The European snow safety community has often thought of complex multiple burial situations as common. An avalanche captures several skiers or mountaineers and buries them in close proximity. The complex pattern of signals results in a difficult search. But how common are such close proximity multiple burials? How often are special methods and technologies really used in the field? Are there other factors that weigh more heavily? We evaluated the data of avalanche incidents in Tyrol from the winters of 1997/98 to 2002/03 with 432 reported avalanches. Tyrolean data was used because it is one of the most complete avalanche incident databases in Europe. In cases where two or more victims were equipped with beacons, the authors interviewed the main searchers to see if special techniques were, or could have been, applied. A special method was used to solve a multiple burial situation in just 1 out of 188 cases. In the interviews, all responsible searchers in multiple burial situations pointed out that the excavation process was the most challenging and time consuming phase of the search, not the beacon search. In recreational avalanche courses, excavation technique should be taught in higher priority than specialized close proximity, multiple burial techniques.