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"BIRD ON A LOG"

Stephen Kamelgarn, M.D.

The Editorial and Publications Committee encourages our member's comments for publication.

Please submit electronically prior to the 15th of the month preceding publication. hdncms@sbcglobal.net

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Gun Violence – Everyone’s Lane

Kate McCaffrey, D.O.



Despite a recent string of tweets from the National Rifle Association telling doctors to "stay in their lane," the importance of medical professionals in the recognition of risk and treatment of gun-related injuries has never been more important. A study of violent gunshot episodes between 2006 and 2014 discovered that 63.1% of gunshots in Chicago, Illinois could be attributed to "social contagion" or peer pressure. The results of this study indicate that gun violence may spread like a disease, through person-to-person interactions, like that of blood-borne pathogens (12). With gun violence on the rise, preventing gun-related suicide, homicide, and unintentional injuries is within everyone's lane.

Firearms are the most common means of suicide in the United States and were responsible for 51% of all suicide deaths in 2016. Furthermore, 22,963 of the total 38,658 gun-related deaths in 2016 were categorized as suicides (1). Suicide is often an impulsive decision, with at least 30% of suicide attempts occurring within 5 to 10 minutes after the first thought of committing self-harm (2). The Suicide Prevention Resource Center identified access to lethal means to be among one of the greatest and most common risk factors for self-harm (4). The combination of impulsivity and easy availability to guns make firearm suicide attempts more likely to be successful than attempts using other means. 82.5% of gun-related suicides result in death, while attempts using other means, such as medication, result in death in only 1-2% of cases (3).

In Colorado, a group of healthcare leaders and gun shop owners have united to help prevent firearm suicides. Known as the Colorado Firearm Safety Coalition, the group hosts awareness events, funds re-

search, and leads safety workshops. Michael Victoroff, a doctor, competitive shooter, and founding member of the coalition, feels strongly about the importance of discussing guns and safety with people. Early in his medical career, a young patient shot and killed herself. "I never saw that coming. I didn't have the slightest clue," Victoroff said. "I didn't know she owned a gun. Now, this week if I were talking to her I would say, 'Do you have a gun in the house? Do you have access to a gun? Does this figure into any of your plans? And, if so, I'd really like to talk to you about changing plans.'" (15)

Suicide is not the only area guns play a role in increasing the likelihood of death. The United States' firearm homicide rate is 25 times greater than that of other comparable developed countries (5). Furthermore, firearm-related homicides have increased by 31% since 2014 (6). Mass shootings, police killings, and civilian homicides have become mundane in the United States. Firearms are the most prevalent murder method, constituting nearly 73% of deaths annually (7).

While the homicide rate in the United States is staggering, unintentional gun injuries were responsible for 500 deaths and over 21,000 nonfatal injuries in 2016 (1). Unfortunately, the pediatric population is the most vulnerable population in the United States to be the victim of unintentional firearm injuries. Children have an unintentional firearm mortality rate 5.5 times higher than that of other comparable developed countries (8). In 2002, a study found that 1.7 million children live in a home with easy access to

loaded, unlocked guns, increasing their risk of death in unintentional shootings by greater than 16 times that of other countries (9). Unintentional injuries constitute 33% of all pediatric firearm incidents and are entirely preventable. Evidence has shown the child-access prevention laws can significantly reduce the prevalence of unintentional firearm injuries (10, 11).

Doctors, nurses, paramedics, medical students, and healthcare providers across the United States have joined Scrubs Addressing the Firearm Epidemic (SAFE) to tackle the growing danger of gun-related deaths. SAFE is an organization dedicated to raising awareness about gun violence as an epidemic health threat. Through research, education, and support of evidence-backed policy, SAFE hopes to determine how best to arm patients with facts and information that allow them to make the most informed decisions surrounding firearms (16). "As future health professionals, especially physicians, we have huge amounts of power in our society," said Mattie Renn, a medical student and SAFE member. "I think there's a certain level of responsibility that comes with that influence."

Firearm violence is a public health crisis in the United States that requires the nation's immediate attention (13). Everyone has a part to play, but the American College of Physicians has released new recommendations on how doctors can reduce gun violence from their lane. A recent article

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published in the Annals of Internal Medicine urges doctors to regularly ask whether patients have guns in their home and to counsel patients on gun safety. The rise in shootings emphasizes "how important and poignant it is for there to be policies that can be really effective in keeping guns away from both those who are either a risk to themselves or to others," said Dr. Ana María López, president of the American College of Physicians. "Firearm-related injuries and deaths really continue to be a part of what is harmful to patients and families," she said. "Gun violence remains an issue in our country, unfortunately, and if this paper can help move hearts and minds to action to prevent these tragedies from happening, that would be a great achievement." (14)

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