



North Coast Physician

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Cover Photo

"BUTTERFLY"

Stephen Kamelgarn, M.D.

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Firearms Are Not Your Friends

Luther F. Cobb, M.D., FACS



I grew up (or failed to do so, if you consult my bride of 40 years) in the American South, Arkansas and Tennessee to be specific. Then, as now, guns were a common feature of many, if not most homes, especially in the rural area where my maternal grandfather, Luther Fuson (yep, that's where I got the name), a Great War veteran, spent his entire life except for his 56 days in the trenches of the Western Front. He did not like fireworks on the Fourth of July, although he was a sincere patriot, because, I think, it reminded him too much of the shelling, and consequent carnage, of trench warfare. But he had a couple of shotguns, and knew well how to use them, although that was seldom. My father was a country boy from a small town in Arkansas, and he too was in a war in France, and subsequently in the army of occupation in Germany. Afterwards, on the GI Bill, he returned to Arkansas to attend college, and eventually law school. In the course of his earlier education, he met my mother, and as was the case in so many "baby boom" families, they married. Despite the fact that Mom was a year younger than he, she was his teacher, having finished college at 19 (she was a very bright lady, but that's another, much longer story). I guess today that would be taboo as sexual harassment, but those were different times, and they remained married until his untimely death from lung cancer at 52 (he started smoking at 13, as did so many of his demographic cohort).

Anyway, I was taught early on how to use a gun safely; my dad had a couple of shotguns, and me and my 5 brothers had a

.22 single-shot rifle, which for the most part we did very little with except target shooting. I do sincerely regret the couple of birds that I shot before realizing that keeping things, and people, alive was more to my liking. My dad was a terrific shot, though, and particularly liked dove and quail hunting. I never partook of the consequent food, at least so far as I recall. When I left for college, he made me a gift of a 16 gauge shotgun, which I never took with me. I don't know if that was a disappointment to him.

The point I am slowly moving towards is that in those days, firearms were for hunting game, not people, and "mass murder" was really not a concept.

That began to change on August 1, 1966 when Charles Whitman ascended the tower at the University of Texas in Austin and shot 45 people, and killed 15 (including a near-term fetus who died with her mother), from an almost perfect sniper's perch at the top of the tower. I recall it very clearly, in part because it was my mother's fortieth birthday, but also because it was such an anomaly. (In a small-world coincidence, Tate Minckler, MD, who served as a pathologist for years at Mad River Hospital, happened to be involved in his autopsy, as he was working in Austin at the time as an autopsy pathologist. He said that, despite the fact that the gunshot wounds to Whitman's head were severe, that there was pretty good evidence that he had a temporal lobe tumor that could have caused his murderous rampage. The father of Whitman's wife, who was murdered before he climbed the tower for his final acts, chose to believe that was the cause, though.)

Mass shootings were sporadic for a long time after that, but I first noted them when I happened to be the director of the Level 1 Trauma Service at Santa Clara Valley Medical Center in San Jose (with a tenure in office at the time of somewhat less than 2 years) when there was a widely reported shooting at ESL Incorporated in Sunnyvale, the next town to the north of San Jose where my hospital was. There, Richard Farley, a guy who had been stalking a former co-worker there for some 8 years, finally snapped after a relentless pursuit was stymied by a restraining order (it was subsequently noted that paper seldom stops bullets). He drove to the facility, lay in wait for a while, then shot through a door to gain entry, and shot 11 people, killing 7. We took care of the 4 survivors, including his intended victim, who survived, fortunately (and she was a very nice lady, who made a good recovery from pretty serious wounds. She had the presence of mind to slam the door in his face, so when he shot her through the door, it absorbed a good deal of the force.)

Well, that was then, and this is now. In gathering information for this article, I checked the "Gun Violence Archive", which is a neutral, non-political rather dry accounting of gunshot victims, both deaths and injuries, as well as suicides. I recommend it, as it is really pretty shocking. In addition to the more than daily mass shootings (defined as 4 or more shot and/or killed in a single event or incident in the same general time and location (and

"Firearms", Continued on Pg. 16

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not including the shooter, who frequently ends up dead as well), there are a great many more incidents of fatal and non-fatal incidents. So many that I fear people are getting benumbed to it.

As of this writing, Memorial Day, May 29, 2023, there have been 17,390 deaths in the US from firearms. Perhaps less known is the fact that much more than half of these are suicides. Total suicide deaths so far are 9570, whereas homicides and unintentional shootings (like the toddler who picks up a loaded gun and kills himself or a sibling, which happens more often than you might think) is 7556. Doing the math, that is 55% of firearms deaths. Of these shootings, there were 257 mass shootings, which even if one includes tomorrow in the denominator, means an average of 1.72 mass shootings every day.

Of course, we only hear about the most egregious of these, like Columbine, Uvalde, Sandy Hook, Virginia Tech, and the like. But it is a rare day where there is not one, or more.

How did this happen? How did we LET it happen? I believe that there is a confluence of factors, and most tend to pick one or another as the panacea. But they are integral to each other. People have been unpleasant, and willing to engage in interpersonal violence, but it is a heck of a lot easier to pull the trigger on a semi-automatic weapon with a large magazine from a safe distance than to engage in the up-close-and-personal hard work, and increased danger, of assailing someone with an edged weapon like a knife or sword.

Our country is awash in firearms. Statistics show that, at present estimates, the USA is far and away the leader in personal firearm possession: there are 120.5 firearms per 100 persons here. The closest second is Yemen, with 52.8 per hundred. And Yemen is in the throes of an all-out civil war.

My contention, and experience as a trauma surgeon, is that ownership of firearms is much more likely to pose a danger to yourself and your intimate partners and

acquaintances than it is to save you from violence. Statistically, only 462, or 2.66% of the firearm deaths were due to defensive use, or the so-called "good guy with a gun". That excludes law enforcement, of course; I don't think anyone believes that they should be unarmed. But, I have in my own personal experience seen three police officers or sheriff's deputies killed with their own weapons. I have not seen any perpetrator killed by the virtuous homeowner defending his castle. I don't say it doesn't happen, because of course there are some, but it is far rarer than is often claimed.

Simply put, a firearm tends to convert an unpleasant interpersonal interaction into a deadly one. It is far too easy to shoot and kill with a gun. I don't own any, nor do my children, nor do any of my 5 brothers and their families.

I recommend you do the same. And work, if you can, for sane regulation of firearms. The Second Amendment dealt not only with organized state militias, but also with muskets that were fairly unreliable, single-shot weapons. That is not what we are dealing with today.

And, finally, please pause to honor and respect those Americans who did sacrifice their lives in defense of our country. §

Advanced Health Care Directive Kit

California law provides individuals the ability to ensure that their health care wishes are known and considered if they become unable to make these decisions themselves. The California Medical Association publishes an Advance Health Care Directive Kit which includes an Advance Health Care Directive form and wallet cards as well as information which answers the questions commonly asked about Advance Directive.

Directive form and wallet cards as well as information which answers the questions commonly asked about Advance Directive.

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June 2023

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 - * National Migrane and Headache Awareness Month
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- [..... and more](#)

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MISCELLANEOUS

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Photos available, upon request.

Contact Niki Moore, Soper Family Psychiatry, (707) 445-4705 x30

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and/or Presenting Health
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Send email to: hdncms@gmail.com

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