

Guns and Public Health

Here Is The Evidence That Guns Are Dangerous To The Health Of Americans:

crickets



Jennifer Heidmann, M.D.

Oops, I forgot, you have to be able to study something scientifically to have evidence. The CDC is not allowed to do research that "advocates or promotes gun control." So for those of us who like to promote healthy choices based on studies that show what seems to be effective in a population, the gun control debate instead becomes rooted in emotions. Rage at the fact that mass shootings keep happening. Grief at the thought of the parents and children and teachers who have lost people they love or have had to hide in a closet hoping not to be shot next. Disbelief that our answer is doing drills to train our children and coworkers how to react when someone opens fire in our place of learning or where we provide healthcare.

Yes, the hard scientific evidence is scant. But there are some numbers. The American Journal of Medicine (129:3, Pp 266–273) published some data gathered from the World Health Organization that showed of 23 high income countries, 91% of bullet-related deaths in children occurred in the USA. 82% of all people killed by guns were from the USA. Accidental gun deaths were 6.2% higher in the USA.

The CDC did a survey (not research, just some facts) comparing the likelihood of being killed by a gun compared with other causes of death in various countries (2017-2012). In the USA, your risk of dying by a gun is similar to your risk of dying in a car accident. Here's the statistics from some other countries by comparison: in the Netherlands, accidental gas poisoning; in Germany, contact with a thrown or falling object; in New Zealand, falling from a lad-

der; in England, contact with agricultural machinery; in Iceland, electrocution; in South Korea, being crushed or pinched between objects; in Japan, being struck by lightning.

Although there are legislators have tried to make it against the law for doctors to discuss guns with patients, there is no federal or state law banning us from doing so at this time. Given the risk of gun-related death our patients face, it should cross our mind to inquire. Is this patient a child? From the journal Pediatrics in June 2017: about 1300 children die from guns, and over 5700 are treated for injuries related to guns annually. Is this patient at risk for suicide? Over 21,000 people kill themselves with guns in the US annually. Is your patient living in Humboldt County? In Humboldt County, we have some of the highest rates for firearms-related deaths as well as suicides in the state (CDPH County Health Status Profiles 2017). Does your patient fit the profile for someone who might be involved in gun-related violence? It is easy to tell, right? Because I can tell by looking at someone whether they are sexually active in unsafe ways, whether they drink too much, whether they are in an abusive relationship, or any number of other things.

Before you get up in arms, so to speak, I am being sarcastic. Of course we learn that profiling people is a good way to miss things in medicine, not to mention being ethically suspect. Unhealthy behaviors are equal opportunity employers. I can personally attest to this in my years of doctoring and in my experience as a parent. I have a son in prison due to his access to

guns, involvement in drugs, addiction and parental naivete. It was never something I considered a possibility in my own family. Thankfully, no one was physically hurt. The lesson here is that the statistics tell us we are all vulnerable. Our patients are vulnerable. Our children are vulnerable.

It is time for doctors to stand up and demand research. It is time for doctors to speak openly with patients about this risk, just as we discuss using seat belts and car seats for the thing that our patients are equally at risk of dying from as gun-related deaths. There is a position paper in the June 2014 Annals of Internal Medicine discussing our responsibility to work toward reduction of gun related deaths and injuries (Ann Intern Med 2014: 160 (12) 858-860). Just last week the AAFP, ACP, ACOG, AAP and APA made a joint statement calling upon our government to act to reduce risk of gun violence by:

- 1) Labelling violence caused by guns a national public health epidemic
- 2)Funding appropriate research at the CDC as part of the FY 2018 omnibus spending package
- 3) Establishing constitutionally appropriate restrictions on manufacturing and sale, for civilian use, of large capacity magazines and firearms with features designed to increase their rapid and extended killing capacity.

The children and adults being harmed and killed by guns in our country could be your children, your patients, or you. We can and we must do better to help each other

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