Implementing a Public Health Approach to Gun Violence Prevention: The Importance of Physician Engagement

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The first month of 2013 brought more discussion about gun policy and more action from our state and national leaders than has occurred in decades. The release of the Vice President’s task force report, the President’s executive actions, and the bills in Congress and several state legislatures are all indications that the country is poised to change how it regulates access to guns.

Whether and to what extent such change occurs will depend in large part on the response from the public. Health care providers, and physicians in particular, are an important source of information for the public and a valued constituency for policymakers. Therefore, as the details of different policy proposals unfold and the public and policymakers weigh the options, we present a case for the role of physicians in these discussions.

A Role for Health Professionals in the Current Gun Policy Dialogue

Fifteen years ago, Dr. Frank Davidoff, then editor of Annals, called on readers to reframe gun violence as a medical issue (1). He referenced survey findings indicating that most physicians viewed gun violence as a public health problem and that they supported a more active role for the profession in preventing it. Despite Dr. Davidoff’s powerful call, the New Year’s resolution offered by the current editors described the efforts since 1998 as “lackluster,” citing evidence that efforts to treat gun violence as a public health problem have been undermined (2).

That reframing gun violence as a public health problem is a point of contention is difficult to understand in light of the numbers that complement the regular media reports of gun violence and its victims. In 2010, more than 31 000 persons in this country died after being shot with a gun; an estimated 73 500 more were shot and survived (3). Ninety percent of the public, including 84% of gun owners and 74% of self-described National Rifle Association members, support new policies that would expand and strengthen the federal background check requirement. Ninety percent of the public, including 84% of gun owners and 74% of self-described National Rifle Association members, support new policies that would expand and strengthen the federal background check requirement.

There seems to be a greater interest in what unites us on this issue. Physicians can help to encourage reasoned discussions by talking with patients and colleagues about guns and gun violence prevention. Physicians can be an important voice for normalizing the dialogue around gun violence and gun policy. The latter is generally considered to be a polarizing topic, despite the fact that public opinion polls consistently show strong support among Americans for a wide range of gun policies. According to a recent survey, most people, regardless of their party affiliation or whether they own a gun, support new policies that would expand and strengthen our current regulatory approach to guns (7).

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The Importance of Physician Engagement in Gun Violence Prevention

Physician as Leader

One way to move beyond the calls to reframe gun violence and acknowledge the “raised voices” in the physician community is through leadership from within. There is a need for more physicians to talk and write about their interactions with patients and colleagues and to lead by example in the statehouses and halls of Congress.

In a democracy such as ours, the public is ultimately responsible for the state of its country. Although there are powerful and well-financed efforts that have subverted the ability of the American people to realize the common-sense gun policies they have long supported, we do not believe the public will has yet been asserted on this issue.

Perhaps that is changing with the new interest being expressed, and perhaps that interest will be helped along by a physician community ready to declare that medicine and public health must be part of the response to the violence that has become such a defining feature of American life. In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., “In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.”

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