

HEALTH POLICY

OKAY NRA, WHY DON'T WE MERGE LANES?

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Several months ago, you said we “anti-gun” doctors should stay in our lane when it comes to gun control.¹ Today, I’d like to invite you into my lane—I want you to come to the table with ideas and funding, and I’ll share with you why.

My wife called me in tears to tell me that she was outside our sons’ school, STEM Academy in Highlands Ranch, Colorado, in May watching SWAT snipers move in to deal with an active shooting in progress. My sons were locked inside, and there was nothing we could do but wait and pray. Here was something I’d proven mathematically to my children to be such a rare occurrence as to be wholly unlikely (number of school shootings divided by number schools equals zero, when using significant digits). And now, here I was facing the 100% likelihood of a school shooting, an anomaly that had come to us.

A favorite aphorism of the NRA is guns are necessary because only a person with a gun can stop a person with a gun. Well, it turns out a bunch of unarmed high school students stood up to both gunmen until police arrived. Wielding only their minds and bodies, they defended themselves and their community.

One student—Kendrick Castillo—died, at least seven others were injured, and we’re talking about the 30th+ mass shooting since we kicked off 2019, many occurring in schools, largely by white men native to the United States.

That day, two students wanted to kill my children. Hell, everyone’s children, at my sons’ school. And the means to do so was via firepower.

I’m not going to argue the Second Amendment, yet, I seem to remember it was written right after we seceded from a king who subjugated his colonists and, without a well-armed militia, we, the burgeoning United States, would not have been able to win this war of attrition. The arguments about gun ownership and what the right to bear arms means now was really settled by the Supreme Court in 2008 (*D.C. v Heller* decision, an interesting case).²

What I’d like your help with is to open funding to research the cause of these huge spikes in gun violence. You’ve lobbied very successfully to bar the CDC and NIH from researching this—depriving federal funds for reasons I can’t imagine. The Dickey Amendment may have been stripped of some of its teeth, now allowing gun research, but with the caveat that the CDC and NIH cannot use any government funding to accomplish that research. Put another way, the CDC and NIH can do all the free research it wants, but no funding is allowed, especially if it might advocate for any measure of gun control.³

While the House of Representatives appears poised to pass funding for gun violence research (\$25 million each for the CDC and NIH) as of August, 2019, any funding requests would still have to pass the Republican-controlled Senate where passage seems less certain.⁴

Instead of helping us physicians and researchers understand how the issues that happened in May continue to play out again and again, you’ve simply thrown your arms up (pun intended) and tell me it’s not the guns’ faults that people are people.

I’ll also excuse your very specious reasoning that if guns were regulated mass killings would continue anyway since people have knives, bombs, etc. We’d be a lot farther along if you had the courage to help us understand the mindset that drives people to it, and ways we could prevent that from happening. Maybe the solution isn’t gun control. Honestly, I just don’t know. But you’re making it hard to get to that point.

Before everyone starts sending me hate mail claiming I want to take everyone’s guns away, let me be clear here: I don’t like that guns are everywhere, I don’t want a gun in my house, but I respect the laws of the land *as they are now*. What I want is a way out. I have two boys whose normal lives were just ripped out of existence. One fellow classmate is dead, and we’re sitting here confused and so very sad for the shooters’ families and the victims and their families.

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Join us physicians in ending gun violence. Open research at the CDC—you're a lobbyist organization, so lobby for this. Stop thinking everyone who wants gun violence to end wants your guns. We don't... but we have no idea how to stop this juggernaut and we need research to figure that out. Help untether the Dickey Amendment.

Come to the table...please.

Fortunately, an organization of physicians has realized that Congress is too slow to act, the NRA too recalcitrant to participate in solving the problem, and that the private sector may offer the only way to fund research to end the epidemic of gun violence in schools. The American Foundation for Firearm Injury Reduction in Medicine—AFFIRM—is a volunteer group of physicians and healthcare providers coming together with donors to fund the research we need and then implement that research in real time to develop an evi-

dence-based approach to prevention.⁵

AFFIRM holds that eliminating gun rights is not a solution. Using public health solutions, AFFIRM aims to reduce the number of gun-associated school shootings by 50% in the next five years. Rigorous study, rollout of protocols, and follow up of outcomes will help end this epidemic scientifically. The goal of a toolkit available to all physicians to bring science to bear on this issue is not only noble, but doable. Without dependence upon government funding, AFFIRM believes it can accomplish this through philanthropic support.

But it takes a village. The NRA can join us in ending this epidemic. They could advocate for government funding to research violence prevention. Let's merge lanes. Let's stop this now. Everyone can win.

References

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