

James L. Holly, M.D.

Gun Violence: Is there a solution?

By James L. Holly, MD

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In the wake of recent school shootings, the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) and the American College of Physicians (ACP) have renewed their call for addressing gun violence as a public health issue. They said: “Gun violence is a national public health epidemic that exacts a substantial toll on the U.S. society...The AAFP asked the current administration and Congress to take ‘concrete steps’ to address gun violence, including classifying gun violence as a national public health epidemic; financing related research as part of the federal budget; and creating constitutionally appropriate restrictions on the manufacturing and sale, for civilian use, of large-capacity magazines and firearms with features designed to increase ‘their rapid and extended killing capacity.’”

No statement on this issue should begin without a lamentation of the personal tragedy of the violence experienced by children, police and ordinary citizens at the hands of criminals with guns. It may seem inadequate to implore God’s comfort upon those whose lives have been ended and/or affected by these brutal acts, but our prayers are sincerely offered.

Nothing said here is intended to dissuade anyone from the pain and anger they justly feel in the face of these tragedies. Our purpose is only to add another voice to the discussion of “what can and what should we do?”

Guns – My Personal Reflections

Gun -- this word can be a noun or a verb, but in today’s world it cannot be spoken without engendering great passion, positive or negative. Like most of life, we fear what we don’t know and the things we love are often those things familiar to us.

Several years ago, in order to influence a friend, I considered joining the ACLU. I did not. I admired the ACLU’s defense of the First Amendment. When in 1978, the ACLU defended the right of the KKK in Skokie, Illinois, to protest. While I hate the KKK, this act affirmed to me the ACLU’s true commitment to the Freedoms of Speech and of Lawful Assembly. Sadly, the ACLU’s defense of civil liberties, or should I say, lack of defense, has increasingly seem to be regulated by prejudice against people with whose political philosophy I agree.

Recently, I also thought about joining the NRA, but have not been able to bring myself to do so. I am fascinated with guns but I cannot say that I love guns. (I am also fascinated with snakes but fear venomous ones.) I feel safer in the absence of guns than I do when guns are present but I realize that I live a life which is rare in today's world. In my nearly 75 years, I have only had a gun pointed at me once and I have only twice been in a situation where there was a real possibility of being shot.

I have carried a gun only once in a potentially dangerous situation, but alas it was not loaded. At that time my home had been burglarized and I was making sure the house was secure before allowing my family to enter. (Before I get a sermon about not having guns loaded, don't. I know the drill.) I have had good safety training on the handling and shoot of guns. And, the one time I have gone to safe place to shoot a handgun, I was a pretty good shot.

Personally, my problem about – and I use the word “about” rather than “with” – guns is that I cannot imagine a situation where I would relish, welcome or like a situation where I would have to point a gun at a human being in malice. However, with family in the military and in law enforcement, I am pleased that they have superior weapons and that they are well trained in how and when to use them. However, I do know that they also do not relish the idea of having to shoot another human being.

I own a number of guns. Some of them are exquisite, handmade works of art. Only one of those has ever been discharged and that only once. Others are family heirlooms which have no economic value and which could only be shot at the peril of the life of the shooter. They are not safe to shoot but that's another story. All are secure and safely stored.

I have family and friends who are licensed to carry a weapon. I have never taken that training because I know that I would never carry a weapon. I do not fault or object to those who do.

I am obviously ambivalent about guns, but, I am not about the Second Amendment to the Constitution. The original intent of the Amendment is not absolutely clear but it is the law of the land as judged by the Supreme Court of the United States. It is unlikely that the Amendment will ever be revoked or that the Supreme Court ruling will be reversed with or without gun control measures.

Not lost on me

Even though we suspect the intent of those who hate guns with their proposals for gun control measures, it should not stop us from recognizing that there can be reasonable and appropriate limitations on certain types of weapons. Some of those controls have been in place for the past 70 years.

When gun rights advocates oppose appropriate and sensible limitations of certain kinds of weapons, it seems to me they weaken their case. It would take away a great deal of the ammunition (ironical use of the word) of the liberals if reasonable limitations on automatic weapons, i.e., large magazines and the ability to modify semi-automatic weapons into automatic

weapons, were accepted by the NRA, This would remove a great deal of the public support for the anti-gun lobby, I think. Personally, I do not think the solution to gun violence in our nation will be a function of the confiscation of guns, or the limitation of gun ownership.

I shared the above thoughts with a Professor from my School of Medicine. Her thoughtful response is shared with her permission. This permission does not include an endorsement of any of this article except the direct quotes from her.

“...My position on guns is: I’ve never owned one and hope I never need to own one in order to survive. I live in a nice neighborhood where I pay high property taxes that ensure good schools, great garbage collection, and trained peace officers who have and are properly trained to use guns. If someone wants to kill me they could find a way to do it whether or not I have a gun, and thus I am a vulnerable member of humanity just like all my neighbors.

“Jesus Christ himself became a vulnerable member of humanity. The incarnation was, among other things, to show humanity a better way to live. Does the example of Jesus tell us we should be fearful and arm ourselves?

“ I wish Americans were appropriately afraid of their more prevalent and omnipresent assailants: hypertension, heart disease and stroke are far more likely to kill us than bad guys with guns. Let us therefore help one another to take action against these assaults to our health, rather than shouting and shooting at one another.

“America should take real and effective action for self-defense through healthy living and stewardship of the earth, with as much fervor as the NRA deploys to protect gun rights . The misplaced energy makes no sense to me. If one loves life and would like to engage in the highest yield actions to preserve one’s life, then healthy food and exercise will offer much better outcomes (measurable health outcomes including life expectancy) than gun ownership. Imagine a randomized trial of gun ownership/training vs healthy lifestyle. Which intervention results in longer, happier lives? I’m not asking to rescind the second amendment, but I wish to point out the following:

“America has grossly misplaced Its priorities. Any country with 22 massacres of school children in less than 5 months has sadly lost its way. It is a travesty of civilization that our nation cannot solve this problem. If we don’t strive to find a solution that ends gun violence, then we have by default chosen the path of chaos and indifference which are opposite of love and light.”

I find nothing in her position with which I disagree.

Conundrum

There are good people on both sides of the “gun argument.” Gun advocates are not blood thirsty savages who want to hurt others, or who desire to see others hurt. Those who are desperate to solve the problem of gun violence also are not evil opponents of the Constitution.

Personally, I think that gun regulations and/or even mass gun confiscation would not solve our problem. Our problem is a societal one. We have a larger and larger population which denies traditional American values and which lacks respect for the rights of others and for the sanctity of human life.

In the short run, the best we can do, I think, and we can do it, is to make it very hard, if not impossible, to take a gun into a public place, particularly into a school. We can also make sure there are trained and qualified people in those public places who are armed and prepared to oppose anyone who secretes a weapon in. Gun-Free zones, while well intentioned, only provided an advertised safe-zone for people who wish to do others harm.

Finally, my professor is correct. In a Columbia, Maryland debate 25 years ago, I spoke in opposition to violence against abortion providers, even though I oppose abortion. When my debate opponent said, "If Jesus had come upon the man being beaten by thieves on the road to Jericho, He would have taken a club and attacked the assailants."

In response, I objected and said, "I know what He would have done." A friend listening to the debate later gasped when I said that. He thought, "You don't know what He would have done." I continued, "He would have walked among the thieves and said, 'Beat Me.'" My friend later told me, when you said that, I thought, "Say nothing more, sit down," which is what I did.

The ultimate solution to violence is not violence but the willingness to sacrifice one's life for the lives of others, which we are told is the greatest act of love. If, rather than fleeing in the face of danger, everyone attacked the assailant, some would be injured and sadly others would be killed, but ultimately, when there is no other choice, if that became the norm, coupled with the preventive measures above and others, this act on the part of potential victims would make us all victors.

This is an observation more than a recommendation but it may be as logical or potentially successful a suggestion as many others being discussed.