How the AMA is stepping up its work to stop gun violence

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The year is not even half over, yet about 10,000 lives have already been claimed by gun violence in the U.S.

"The devastation of firearm violence in America touches every state and every community. The scope of this crisis goes beyond mass shootings, with suicides, homicides and unintentional shooting deaths happening every single day," said Sandra Adamson Fryhofer, MD, who is the inaugural chair of the AMA Gun Violence Task Force.

The AMA's advocacy to prevent firearm violence dates back to the 1980s, Dr. Fryhofer said. In 1998, the AMA published a gun-safety guide for physicians that provided a broad overview of public health and clinical issues related to firearms.

The AMA declared gun violence a public health crisis in 2016 following the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando that saw 49 people killed and dozens more injured.

"Sadly, firearm injuries and deaths have continued to increase since that declaration," said Dr. Fryhofer, an Atlanta internist who also chairs the AMA Board of Trustees. "And it's not from a lack of AMA policy. The AMA's passed more than two dozen policies supporting measures like extending waiting periods, strengthening background checks, and adopting extreme risk protection orders."

Dr. Fryhofer spoke about the task force’s work to prevent firearm violence in a recent episode of “AMA Update."

Bringing advocates together

At the 2022 AMA Interim Meeting in November, the House of Delegates adopted new policies that included ensuring active-shooter drills consider children's mental health and advocating warning labels on ammunition packages. Delegates also directed for the AMA to create the firearms violence task
force.

The task force’s first gathering came in Washington, D.C., and included physician leaders and high-level staff from the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Family Physicians and the American College of Physicians. Dr. Fryhofer and her colleagues also heard from leaders of other efforts such as the Brady End Family Fire campaign, Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions, and Giffords—an organization co-founded by former Arizona Rep. Gabby Giffords.

At the meeting, the task force explored Rep resources on safe, secure storage of firearms, heard about how gun violence’s inequitable impact, and discovered how to dispel myths about people with mental health and firearms.

"The outside organizations that we had at this small meeting stressed the importance of community partnerships," Dr. Fryhofer said. "Another recurrent theme of the day was: Words matter. The language you use can either open up discussions or close them down."

Creating more tools for physicians

Dr. Fryhofer and other members of the AMA task force heard how the lack of basic knowledge about firearms can be a barrier for some physicians as they attempt to talk with gun-owning patients and families.

"The AMA has already created a CME module to help physicians learn how to identify and counsel patients at high risk of firearm injury and death," Dr. Fryhofer said. "Case studies focus on patients at risk of suicide, victims of domestic violence and parents with firearms in the home."

A further update on the task force’s work will be shared at the 2023 AMA Annual Meeting in June. Meanwhile, an online tool detailing state-specific laws on counseling restrictions, safe storage and child-access protection laws, temporary transfer requirements, and extreme risk protection orders is expected this spring.

In the task force’s next steps, Dr. Fryhofer said, “we hope to involve even more physician organizations in our task force work. Meanwhile, the AMA continues to push lawmakers to adopt common sense steps broadly supported by the American public to prevent avoidable deaths and injuries caused by firearm violence."

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