Doctors eye illegal sources, better data to address firearm deaths

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In the immediate aftermath of the Pulse nightclub shooting in 2016, the AMA declared gun violence to be a public health crisis in the United States. And in the years since, the crisis has worsened.

In just the first nine months of this year, there were nearly 33,000 firearm-related deaths in the country, including over 15,000 homicides, murders and unintentional deaths, notes an American Academy of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation resolution presented at the 2022 AMA Interim Meeting.

The AMA has extensive policy that calls for the expansion of research-and mitigation-strategies. Yet “these entities have failed to produce timely research, recommendations and mitigation strategies to address the national firearm injury public health crisis,” says the resolution.

To help reorient the public and national conversation about the national firearm injury public health crisis, the AMA House of Delegates adopted new policy to “support research examining the major sources of illegally possessed firearms, as well as possible methods of decreasing their proliferation in the United States.”

Delegates also directed the AMA to:

- Work with key stakeholders—including, but not limited to, firearm manufacturers, firearm advocacy groups, law enforcement agencies, public health agencies, firearm injury victim advocacy groups, health care providers, and state and federal government agencies—to develop evidence-informed public health recommendations to mitigate the effects of violence committed with firearms.
- Collaborate with key stakeholders and advocate for national public forums—including, but not limited to, online venues, national radio and televised or streamed in-person town halls—that bring together key stakeholders and members of the general public to focus on
finding common ground, nonpartisan measures to mitigate the effects of firearms in our firearm injury public health crisis.

Earlier this week at the Interim Meeting, the House of Delegates directed the AMA to create a task force focused on preventing gun violence.

**Bolster evidence to prevent deaths**

A lack of funding and research has impeded health care’s ability to apply evidence-based approaches to reducing firearm injuries and deaths in U.S. children and youth, says a resolution from the American Academy of Pediatrics that was presented at the Interim Meeting.

And while funding has been appropriated in all 50 states to provide data for the National Violent Death Reporting System—an important first step—the resolution as submitted noted that a real-time surveillance system for firearm injuries is needed. The resolution also called for the repeal of the 2003 Tiahrt amendment, which prohibits the release of firearm-tracing data for research.

Delegates directed the AMA to advocate:

- Improvements to the quality, comparability and timeliness of data on firearm injuries and deaths.
- Repeal of laws which prohibit the release of firearm-tracing data for research.

**Address gun suicide in seniors, others**

In a separate action, delegates moved to address firearm violence and suicide among older adults.

While suicide is often an impulsive act that is amenable to intervention, one of the barriers to addressing this crisis is that physicians are often hesitant to discuss and counsel patients on firearm safety, says a resolution from the AMA Senior Physicians Section.

To raise awareness and address this issue, delegates directed the AMA to:

- Develop and disseminate a formal educational program to enable clinicians to effectively and efficiently address suicides with an emphasis on seniors and other high-risk populations.
- Develop with other interested organizations a toolkit for clinicians to use addressing Extreme Risk Protection Orders in their individual states.

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Partner with other groups interested in firearm safety to raise public awareness of the magnitude of suicide in seniors and other high-risk populations, and interventions available for suicide prevention.

Learn more with the AMA Ed Hub™ course, “The Physician’s Role in Promoting Firearm Safety.”

Read about the other highlights from the 2022 AMA Interim Meeting.