Headlines

Ponder these referenced statements:

"20% of U.S. emergency departments (EDs) have firearms or knives brought in on a daily or weekly basis."

"Health care facilities were the site of 2.5% of active shooter events in the United States between 2000 and 2013."

These facts come from the introduction to this month's POTM: Emergency Providers' Familiarity with Firearms: A National Survey. To put this into a more personal perspective, may I offer a description of an experience in Paris:

In the summer of 2017, I was with five friends—all were emergency physicians. They live in France (3), Belgium (1) and Spain (1). We were at Le Carillon—a bar across the street from a major hospital that doctors frequent. It was also the site of a mass shooting that was part of the larger November 13, 2015 massacre in Paris. An emergency physician was killed in that attack. We were discussing the issue of firearm injuries in the emergency department. Someone asked, to no one in particular: "How many gunshot wounds have you treated in your career?" Summing all numbers from five European physicians, with over 70 years of practice between them, yielded...eight (8). I recalled more than one bad "gunshot wound day" from my work in both Charlotte and Indianapolis with more than 8 shooting victims on one shift. Many American emergency physicians could tell worse stories about shootings than could I.

Why do emergency providers need to know about firearms? Because, as Ketterer et al reminded us in the March issue of AEM, "Firearms resulted in 78,431 deaths between 2016 and 2018, a rate of 12.1 per 100,000 people." Guns often appear in our workplace. See the data in Table 2: over half of the 1,074 survey respondents encounter a gun in the emergency department on at least a yearly basis but the minority of respondents are aware of hospital protocols for handling firearms. Under one-half of all respondents felt confident in their ability to deal with a firearm found on a patient. However, gun ownership by the respondent corresponded with feelings of high self-confidence in this ability.

Although the title of this paper uses the word "familiarity," the data more saliently tell the story of "exposure" to firearms. The concept of exposure naturally transitions to the current global headline; guns are like viruses...they infect society and cause destruction and death. Today, on March 10, 2020, COVID-19 has the nation's attention. That virus may kill two persons in the U.S. today,
exacting a terrible loss. But also today, in the U.S., firearms will kill about 95 other people. Using lives lost as the logical currency of newsworthiness, why is this not the number one headline every day?

Best wishes,
Jeffrey A. Kline, MD
Editor-in-Chief, Academic Emergency Medicine