

AAP NEWS

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SECOND OPINIONS

'If not us, who?'

In the October issue of *AAP News*, there is a letter from Dr. Madrigal-Dersch responding to the AAP's emphasis on gun control legislation. In this letter, Dr. Madrigal-Dersch criticizes the AAP's focus on "... the hysterical outcry against guns," and in the end claims that the focus on gun control is "... outside the pale of pediatric practice."

I personally cannot think of an issue that is more relevant to pediatric practice than gun control. Firearm-related injuries are the second leading cause of death in pediatrics, and a child dies in the United States every 1½ hours from a handgun.^{1,2} No amount of emphasis that the American Academy of Pediatrics places on gun control can be considered to be excessive.

In addition, Dr. Madrigal-Dersch says that pediatricians need to be analytical and scientific about gun control, yet in the same letter she criticizes the AAP for supporting a Centers for Disease Control study on gun injuries and deaths involving persons younger than 21 years. Apparently her only complaint with this study is that patients between 17 and 21 are no longer children.² The National Rifle Association and its allies have come up with the most inventive ways to prevent the CDC from studying the prevention of gun injuries. Honestly, I think Dr. Madrigal-Dersch can come up with something more original.

The last study I can find on firearm injuries³ indicates that 71 percent of all homicides are firearm-related, and that one-third of all firearm homicides occur to adolescents and young adults whose rates remain "at record high levels." No wonder Dr. Madrigal-Dersch does not want the CDC to study this plague anymore.

Dr. Madrigal-Dersch also makes the claim that there are enough gun control laws already to make any emphasis by the American Academy of Pediatrics superfluous. However, a 1997 study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* indicated that only 12 states have gun control storage laws, and in those states unintentional shooting deaths were reduced by 23 percent.⁴ It is obvious that while gun laws may be effective, they differ from state to state and are unevenly enforced. We should make every effort to encourage uniform and effective gun laws that have no loopholes.

Dr. Madrigal-Dersch in her letter quotes a study that 1 million crimes were deterred by guns. While I highly doubt the legitimacy of this study, I would like to point out that a June 1997 article in the *American Journal of Public Health* reported the risk of a family handgun being used in a suicide or a homicide was roughly twice as great among families with handguns.⁵ It would appear, then, that guns in the home are probably more dangerous than they are protective.

The National Rifle Association has for many years enjoyed an uncontested view of handguns in the United States. No effective lobbying group has appeared to counter this group. The medical community has the money, the moral standing, and the clear agenda to be such a counterweight. I believe that the American Academy of Pediatrics, and all the medical organizations, should be devoting a majority of their time to fighting this scourge of public health. In the words of Primo Levy, "If not us, who? If not now, when?"

1. Freed LH, Vernick JS, Hargarten SW. "Prevention of firearm-related injuries and deaths among youth. A product-oriented approach." *Pediatric Clinics*

PORTRAIT



PhotoDisc

New slant on sisterhood

When snowy slopes make it tough to 'smile for the camera,' an older sister can be a lifesaver.

of North America. 1998;45(2):427-38.

2. Powell EC, Sheehan KM, Christoffel KK. "Firearm violence among youth: public health strategies for prevention." *Annals of Emergency Medicine*. 1996;28(2):204-12.

3. Anonymous. "Trends in rates of homicide - United States, 1985-1994." *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. 1996;45(22):46-4.

4. Cummings P, et al. "State gun safe storage laws and child mortality due to firearms." *Journal of the American Medical Association*. 1997;278(13):1084-6.

5. Cummings P, et al. "The association between the purchase of a handgun and homicide or suicide." *American Journal of Public Health*. 1997;87(6):974-8.

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Children or guns?

I read with interest the letter-to-the-editor from Juliette Madrigal-Dersch, M.D., in the October *AAP News*. I feel compelled to confront her opinion, mistakenly represented as fact. As many of our politicians do, she demonizes our youth as being responsible for the majority of crime when her refer-

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