

Frustrated AMA adopts sweeping policies to cut gun violence

June 12 2018, by Lindsey Tanner



In this Thursday, April 19, 2018 file photo, crosses representing victims of gun violence stand outside Collins Academy High School in Chicago's North Lawndale neighborhood. With frustration mounting over lawmakers' inaction on gun control, the American Medical Association on Tuesday, June 12, 2018, pressed for a ban on assault weapons and came out against arming teachers as way to fight what it calls a public health crisis. (AP Photo/Martha Irvine)

With frustration mounting over lawmakers' inaction on gun control, the

American Medical Association on Tuesday pressed for a ban on assault weapons and came out against arming teachers as a way to fight what it calls a public health crisis.

At its annual policymaking meeting, the nation's largest physicians group bowed to unprecedented demands from doctor-members to take a stronger stand on gun violence—a problem the organizations says is as menacing as a lethal infectious disease.

The action comes against a backdrop of recurrent school shootings, everyday street violence in the nation's inner cities, and rising U.S. suicide rates.

"We as physicians are the witnesses to the human toll of this disease," Dr. Megan Ranney, an emergency-medicine specialist at Brown University, said at the meeting.

AMA delegates voted to adopt several of nearly a dozen gun-related proposals presented by doctor groups that are part of the AMA's membership. They agreed to:

- Support any bans on the purchase or possession of guns and ammunition by people under 21.
- Back laws that would require licensing and safety courses for gun owners and registration of all firearms.
- Press for legislation that would allow relatives of suicidal people or those who have threatened imminent violence to seek court-ordered removal of guns from the home.
- Encourage better training for physicians in how to recognize patients at risk for suicide.

— Push to eliminate loopholes in laws preventing the purchase or possession of guns by people found guilty of domestic violence, including expanding such measures to cover convicted stalkers.

Many AMA members are gun owners or supporters, including a doctor from Montana who told delegates of learning to shoot at a firing range in the basement of her middle school as part of gym class. But support for banning assault weapons was overwhelming, with the measure adopted in a 446-99 vote.

"There's a place to start and this should be it," Dr. Jim Hinsdale, a San Jose, California, trauma surgeon, said before the vote.

Gun violence is not a new issue for the AMA; it has supported past efforts to ban assault weapons; declared gun violence a public health crisis; backed background checks, waiting periods and better funding for mental health services; and pressed for more research on gun violence prevention.

But Dr. David Barbe, whose one-year term as AMA president ended Tuesday, called the number of related measures on this year's agenda extraordinary and said recent violence, including the Parkland, Florida, school shooting and the Las Vegas massacre, "spurred a new sense of urgency ... while Congress fails to act."

"It has been frustrating that we have seen so little action from either state or federal legislators," he said. "The most important audience for our message right now is our legislators, and second most important is the public, because sometimes it requires public pressure on the legislators."

While it is no longer viewed as the unified voice of American medicine, the AMA has more clout with politicians and the public than other doctor groups. It counted more than 243,000 members in 2017, up

slightly for the seventh straight year. But it represents less than one-quarter of the nation's million-plus physicians.

AMA members cited U.S. government data showing almost 40,000 deaths by gun in 2016, including suicides, and nearly 111,000 gun injuries. Both have been rising in recent years.

By comparison, U.S. deaths from diabetes in 2016 totaled almost 80,000; Alzheimer's, 111,000; and lung disease, 155,000. The leaders are heart disease, with 634,000 deaths in 2016, and cancer, about 600,000.

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