

EDITOR'S COMMENT

Society's ills



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In March, *CME* brings you the second volume of your 2-volume textbook on forensic medicine — complete, up-to-date and totally pertinent to practice in South Africa. I was particularly struck by Gert Saayman's article on gunshot injuries. The statistics are horrifying. South Africa, with a population of around 42 million, has 20 000 deaths from gunshot wounds every year. The USA, with a population of more than 60 million, has around 30 000 fatalities caused by gunshots each year — and about 16 000 of these are due to suicide and not homicide. Even more horrific is South Africa's contribution to the 500 000 people around the world who die from gunshot wounds each year — of whom around 300 000 die in regional conflict and the remaining 200 000 from interpersonal violence and suicide. South Africa probably contributes a greater number of homicidal deaths to this latter figure than any other country.

I'm sure there are many of you reading this who are opposed to the philosophy of Gunfree South Africa — and hopefully there are at least as many of you who agree with my opinion that legal gun ownership only contributes to this terrible toll of human suffering and death. I grew up in a house where there was a fire-arm present. My father was a policeman in what was then Northern Rhodesia and always had his service revolver with him. He was a very good shot — winning trophies at the regular shooting contests that took place. However, I think that he used the gun outside the course of his duties only once — and seldom during them. Gun ownership was illegal among all but the police and army at that time and it was very unusual for criminals to carry guns. At independence we went to the UK, where not even the police carry guns, except in exceptional circumstances, and gun ownership among criminals was very unusual. I know that this has changed over the past few decades, but it is a simple fact that in countries where gun ownership is illegal for the general population deaths and injuries from gunshot wounds are relatively uncommon. In several stints in casualty departments in big city hospitals in the UK I never saw a single gunshot wound — compare that to a busy casualty department in just about any hospital in South Africa.

I'm afraid that I have never been able to see how allowing just about anyone to own a gun can help to keep either an individual or society safe. If there is a supply chain, it will be broken by those who do not want guns for self-defence, but for criminal reasons. No supply chain and it becomes that much more difficult for criminals to get hold of guns. There will always be those criminals who will manage to find guns. But we wouldn't have the situation where any petty criminal can easily get hold of a gun — and all too often use it in the perpetration of a crime. I know of several successful robberies in my area of Cape Town (Noordhoek) recently where the target was the gun safe. In one, right next door, the owner hid the key to the safe in the same room as the safe and the guns were not registered either — not responsible gun ownership and probably all too common a situation.

On another matter entirely — there has been a tremendous response to my request for artwork by doctors for the front covers of *CME* and we started using this in January this year. However, I have a rather embarrassing confession to make. I have lost the names of some of the contributors! I would be very grateful if everyone who sent art in could e-mail me again (ugqirha@iafrica.com) and let me know the names of the pieces of art that they sent in, so that everyone can be properly acknowledged.

Enjoy your reading.