

Newtown Tragedy a Call for Us All to Speak Up

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Thoughts on the tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut, as a mother, a physician, and a citizen of the larger community.

Source: Physicians Practice

I, like all of you, am still processing the horrific events from last Friday in Connecticut. It made me ill to look at the pictures of those small children and imagine the savagery and derangement that would allow anyone to hurt them. It is incomprehensible to figure out the “why” to this tragedy. I respond to this event as a mother first and only later as a physician.

As a mother, I can only imagine the depths of sorrow those mothers and fathers are experiencing right now. Their loss is heart-wrenching and people all over the world feel a small portion of their pain. Of course, it makes me wonder about my own children’s safety. I am somewhat reassured by the security measures I know that all schools have and the likely tightening of those measures in the days and weeks to come. Yet, part of the reason this event is so traumatic is its very randomness. How can anyone predict let alone prevent such unfathomable evil? I am grateful for the tips my children’s school sent home that guide us in the conversations with our kids about what happened in Connecticut, especially as my patients will expect me to offer similar advice. At the end of it, though, I grieve for all the lives lost, I wonder what it means about the world in which my children live, and I appreciate the days I’ve been given with these precious lives.

As a physician, I look at what happened in Connecticut through a different lens — more a lens of responsibility as a physician and as a citizen. My healthcare system readily acknowledges the limited role physicians play in the overall health of their patients, citing statistics indicating that only about 15 percent to 20 percent of what we do as physicians contributes to a patient’s health. Other things like community and the psycho-socioeconomic conditions in which a patient lives end up playing a much larger role. My healthcare system shares this to encourage a focus on the health of not only our patients but the health of our community.

From a community health perspective, the events leading up to the Newtown school shooting involves multiple failures in our society. While it ultimately was the choice of one person to perpetrate such a heinous act, his circumstances radiate outwards, rippling through our entire country. We should not forget that he was able to create such devastation in a matter of minutes with a legally acquired weapon. I still haven’t heard a logical explanation for why anyone would need to own an assault rifle. I know there is a lot of debate about gun laws and regulations and what effect they would actually have. Yet, as a thinking person, I do not understand why we allow such destructive weapons to be freely owned.

I also think about the shooter’s mother. From the reports I read, she struggled privately to try to help her mentally ill son. I can imagine the challenges she faced because I face similar challenges trying to get my own patients appropriate mental health care. Our mental health system has been gutted. The fragile remains cannot support even a fraction of the mental health disease burden in this country.

I encourage you as parents, physicians, and citizens to grieve as you will but then to add your voice to the conversation about gun laws and mental health services that may have contributed to unspeakable horror.

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