From the Editor: It's time for us to talk about guns

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Studies have shown that most of you already have deep-seated beliefs regarding guns. Some of you would frame the issue as Gun Rights, others as Gun Violence. I am not here to change your opinion. I am not in the habit of wasting my time. Logic has been drained from this discussion and emotion infused. As vascular surgeons, it is far past time to overcome these limitations and join the national discussion. Opinions and consensus statements have already been rendered from the American College of Surgeons, the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Society of Thoracic Surgeons, and even the American College of Phlebology. Where does the SVS stand?

In January 2013, the Board of Directors of the SVS voted to support the ACS Statement on Firearm Injuries. There is virtually no public record of this endorsement, it does not appear on the SVS website and it was essentially ignored by the public.

Even the diligent National Rifle Association (NRA) left the SVS off their list of “National Organizations with Anti-Gun Policies” (Ed note: for more information, see “The Evolution of the NRA and Our Modern Gun Debate” at www.vascularspecialistonline.com).

We need to do better. If we are truly an independent specialty it is time to behave as such. Vascular surgeons are on the front lines of this battle. We have cared for the injured, revived the dying, and bear witness to the dead. To not have a voice and be counted is a disservice to our patients and ourselves.

What can be done to reduce gun violence? In Australia, between 1979 and 1996, there were 13 mass shootings. After a semiautomatic weapon ban was instituted in 1996 there have been none. The U.S. ban on military style weapons lapsed in 2004. While it is difficult to characterize “mass shootings” in a country our size, there certainly seems to be an increase since then. If defined as “four or more shot and/or killed in a single event, at the same general time and location not including the shooter,” then we have seen 275 mass shootings this year as of Oct. 5, 2017.

The other statistics are familiar and sobering. More Americans have died from guns since 1968 than have died in all the wars since our country’s inception. The United States accounts for 91% of gun deaths of children among developed countries. Our casualty figures more closely mirror Somalia and Honduras, not Britain or Germany.

Contemporary, large-scale research in limiting gun violence is essentially nonexistent since a 1993 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) funded study found a link between keeping a gun in the home with an increased risk of homicide. Quick to respond, Congress passed the 1996 Dickey Amendment that prohibits the CDC from funding efforts...
that “advocate or promote gun control.” This amendment has been renewed every year despite the author of the bill, Representative Jay Dickey, expressing regret for halting all gun research, stating that was not his intention. Rep. Dickey died earlier this year.

In the U.S., gun laws have actually relaxed over time. In 1988, 18 states had laws allowing civilians to carry concealed hand guns in public places, now this practice is legal in 40 states. In a 2008 landmark decision, the Supreme Court struck down a personal handgun ban in the District of Columbia. The Second Amendment rights afforded to a “well-regulated militia” to “keep and bear arms” were now extended to private individuals. Guns are clearly more prevalent and available in the U.S. than ever before.

The congressional ban on firearms research now extends to all Department of Health and Human Services agencies, including the NIH. We need the Dickey Amendment lifted so we can study the relationship of gun ownership and crime. As physicians, we need to deal from an informed, intelligent position and not an emotional one.

Over 50 medical societies, comprising essentially every physician in the U.S., have released statements on gun violence. The AMA has labeled it a “public health crisis.” The ACS stated, in the aftermath of the Las Vegas shooting, “It is important that the American College of Surgeons, whose Fellows care for the victims of these events, be part of the solution.”

Aside from ethical or moral obligations, why should we dive into this quagmire? Most of us are already represented in the discussion through other groups. The answer lies in our identity. If vascular surgery is to become a truly independent specialty, we can’t hide behind the ACS or the AMA when the politics become sticky.

To protect the 30,000 people who die from aneurysm rupture yearly we literally forced an act of Congress. Where do we stand on the more than 33,000 people who die yearly from gun violence? For vascular surgery to have a true public presence, we must be prepared to enter the most public of all discussions.

Luckily, there is already a pathway to consensus. The American College of Surgeons Committee on Trauma (ACS COT) surveyed its members and found that only 15% had no strong opinions on firearms. Just over 50% felt that guns were important for personal safety and defense, while 30% felt the large number of guns in the U.S. was a threat to safety.

Individuals who felt that firearms were important were most likely to associate guns with personal freedom, while those who felt they were a threat were most likely to associate guns with violence.

To further the discussion, the emotional battle between personal freedom and violence needed to be minimized. In doing so, the ACS COT was able to produce a consensus statement despite the seemingly diametrically opposed opinions of its members.

An independent specialty needs an independent voice. If we don’t know our own position, obviously the public doesn’t either.

As a starting point, here is the ACS Statement on Firearms Injuries:

Because violence inflicted by guns continues to be a daily event in the United States and mass casualties involving firearms threaten the health and safety of the public, the American College of Surgeons supports:

1. Legislation banning civilian access to assault weapons, large ammunition clips, and munitions designed for military and law enforcement agencies.

2. Enhancing mandatory background checks for the purchase of firearms to include gun shows and auctions.
3. Assuring that health care professionals can fulfill their role in preventing firearm injuries by health screening, patient counseling, and referral to mental health services for those with behavioral medical conditions.

4. Developing and promoting proactive programs directed at improving safe gun storage and the teaching of nonviolent conflict resolution for a culture that often glorifies guns and violence in media and gaming.

5. Evidence-based research on firearm injury and the creation of a national firearm injury database to inform federal health policy.

Selected References
1) Gun Violence Research: History of Federal Funding Freeze (www.apa.org/science/about/psa/2013/02/gun-violence.aspx)
2) Childhood Firearm Injuries in the United States (www.apa.org/science/about/psa/2013/02/gun-violence.aspx)
5) American College of Surgeons Statement on Firearm Injuries (www.facs.org)

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