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National Medical Groups Call for Action to Reduce Firearm Injury as Federal Assault Weapons Ban is Set to Expire

[Washington, DC] – With the 1994 federal assault weapons ban set to expire next week, 13 national medical and health organizations are urging all candidates for public office to take immediate action to reduce gun death and injury. The groups sent their consensus statement, which includes a call for strengthening the ban, to President George W. Bush and Senator John Kerry last week. To date, neither campaign has responded.

Physicians and medical groups are calling for action because they view gun violence as an ongoing homeland security problem. The U.S. gun death rate far exceeds rates in all other wealthy countries; nearly 30,000 Americans die from gun injuries every year. The annual cost of gun violence is estimated at \$100 billion.

The consensus statement asks for a comprehensive plan to reduce gun injuries, claiming that ending the firearm injury epidemic should be “among the leading imperatives of our time, along with access to health care, economic policy, environmental protection and, indeed, terrorism and the war in Iraq.”

“We are calling on President Bush, Senator Kerry and members of Congress to address gun-related injury as a public health priority,” said Michael McCally, MD, PhD, president of Physicians for Social Responsibility. “While the U.S. focuses its resources on possible terror attacks from unnamed enemies, thousands of Americans are dying from gunshot wounds.”

“Allowing the assault weapons ban to expire is a step in the wrong direction,” said Katherine Kaufer Christoffel, MD, MPH, professor of pediatrics and preventive medicine at Feinberg School of Medicine, Northwestern University, and founder of the HELP Network in Chicago. “Gun injury remains a critical public health problem. Most national medical societies agree on how to prevent these injuries – by reducing access to guns.”*

Charles Francis, MD, president of the American College of Physicians, and Carden Johnston, MD, president of the American Academy of Pediatrics, emphasized that adults and children of all ages are at risk. Dr. Francis stated, “We need a comprehensive national plan and localized plans for reducing gun violence. Most homicides, suicides and domestic violence deaths in the United States involve guns, causing untold suffering for victims and their families.”

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Physicians say they are ready to work with policymakers in developing prevention strategies, and that the pending expiration of the assault weapons ban, despite overwhelming public support for extending it, is a symptom of a much larger problem: Policymakers have been unable or unwilling to effectively address the public health toll of gun injuries in America.

Dr. Johnston said it is absolutely unacceptable that an average of eight American children are killed by firearms every day – nearly 3,000 children and youth each year. “Sadly, pediatricians see far too many children who are disabled or die from gun injuries,” commented Dr. Johnston. “Guns should not be in places where children live and play.”

* Dr. Christoffel’s article in the June issue of Injury Prevention outlined the broad consensus on guns among 14 national medical societies. Call the HELP Network at 773-880-3826 for more information. Longjohn MM, Christoffel KK. Are medical societies developing a standard for gun injury prevention? Injury Prevention June 2004;10(3):169-73.

Medical Groups Presenting the Statement Include: Ambulatory Pediatric Association, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Association for the Surgery of Trauma, American Association of Suicidology, American College of Emergency Physicians, American College of Physicians, American College of Preventive Medicine, American College of Surgeons, American Medical Women’s Association, American Public Health Association, National Hispanic Medical Association, and the National Medical Association.

SOURCE: American Academy of Pediatrics; Doctors Against Handgun Injury.

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