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# Teaching Healthcare Ethics Students How to Cope With Gun Violence

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### **Teaching Healthcare Ethics Students How to Cope With Gun Violence**

Buchbinder (2017) provides assignments for Financial Management, Epidemiology, Health Policy, Leadership, and Human Resources classes to help students process the physical and emotional effects of gun violence in America. The following additional assignments are provided for bachelor's, master's and doctoral level Medical Ethics classes.

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## Teaching Healthcare Ethics Students How to Cope with Gun Violence

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Recently, on the *Jones & Bartlett Blog*, health care professor and author Dr Sharon Buchbinder shared examples of assignments that engage the student's critical thinking skills by framing gun violence as a health epidemic.<sup>1</sup> Buchbinder advises health science educators of the need to "prepare our students to work within the realities of an environment where people will be injured or killed with guns at home, work, play, and prayer."<sup>2</sup>

To help students treat and process the physical and emotional effects of gun violence, Buchbinder describes assignments to be used in five different healthcare classes: 1. Financial Management, 2. Epidemiology, 3. Health Policy, 4. Leadership, and 5. Human Resources.<sup>3</sup> For example, an assignment for the Financial Management class might require students to imagine themselves in the role of an emergency department director who is adjusting the budget at a not-for-profit hospital three months after a mass shooting that claimed the lives of 300 people. "Thirty percent (30%) of the victims were under that age of 26 and on their parent's insurance; twenty-five percent (25%) had employer-based health insurance; twenty-five (25%) were on Medicare Part A; and the rest (20%) had no health insurance. Based on a worst case scenario, what should you tell your CFO about the losses due to this incident? What impact will this have on your future planning for your emergency department?"<sup>4</sup>

Another Buchbinder assignment, designed for Health Policy suggests that students use online resources such as *FollowTheMoney.org* and *OpenSecrets.org* to identify which of their Congressmen and Senators received contributions from gun advocacy groups, and how much. Students are challenged to interview their representatives in order to find out what their positions are on "criminal background checks for gun purchases, sales of gun to people with mental illness, and bans on bump stocks and assault style weapons."<sup>5</sup>

Buchbinder's assignments are innovative and provocative, but I was surprised that Medical Ethics was not on the list of healthcare courses that could help students address the gun violence epidemic in America. So, I created assignments relevant to the gun violence epidemic in America for bachelor's, master's, and doctoral level medical ethics classes.

### **Assignment for a bachelor's level medical ethics class:**

Design a one-page patient education brochure or informational handout for health professionals on gun safety. Organize facts, figures, pictures, and other resources that weigh both pro and con gun control interests, including personal, organizational (e.g., NRA, AMA), political, and ethical stances. This is an opportunity to express medical professionalism and ethical competence for the target audience (either patients OR caregivers) of your educational material. Consider how the brochure may be shared with the target audience.

### **Assignment for a master's level medical ethics class:**

According to Rochelle Riley, Detroit Press Columnist, "Every man, woman and child in the U.S. should carry a gun."<sup>6</sup> The sheer number of guns in America is predicted to grow from 4.1 billion last year to 5.3 billion in 2020.<sup>7</sup> Many state bills already allow guns in churches where people are praying and taverns where people are drinking, so why not allow guns in hospitals and clinics where babies are born, the sick are treated, and family and friends are visiting? Should the hospital or clinic depend solely upon armed security guards and local law enforcement, or should patients, doctors, nurses, medical technicians, EMTs, office staff, patients, and family arm themselves? Apply ethical theories such as utilitarianism/consequentialism, deontology, natural law,

virtue ethics, and ethical principles such as beneficence/non-maleficence, justice, and respect for autonomy to support your decision

**Assignment for a doctoral level medical ethics class:**

Mr. and Mrs. Hibbing take their 15-year-old son, who is suffering from depression, to the pediatrician. The doctor asks the parents to leave the room before she asks the teen about sex, drugs, and whether there are any guns in his home. Later, the parents learn that a note was made in their son's chart, describing the multiple firearms in their home as a "veritable arsenal of assault weapons." The parents file a formal complaint to the clinic director, saying the doctor overstepped her bounds by asking their son these intrusive questions about their personal life. The clinic claims the questions are in line with Section 2716(c) of the *Affordable Care Act* and the "standard of care" defined by the *American Academy of Pediatrics*. Some of the pediatric clinic employees are fearful of the potential for violence, so they discharge the teen and his family from their care. The parents feel they are being discriminated against by "liberal doctors" at the clinic and are fearful that the son's medical record will be made public, which could lead to unfair bias and increased insurance premiums. They hire an attorney who files a lawsuit claiming that questions about gun ownership violate the state's *Firearm Privacy Act*, disregard the *Second Amendment to the United States Constitution*, and discriminate against "law abiding citizens." Is it ethical for caregivers to ask questions about firearms in the home? Support your decision using the Four-Topic Approach developed by Jonsen, Siegler and Winslade (i.e., features relevant to Medical Indications, Patient Preferences, Quality of Life, and Contextual Features).<sup>6</sup>

Medical, nursing, and allied health students and professionals exercise their ethical muscles by wrestling with medical dilemmas, especially when it comes to current controversial topics such as gun control and safety. It is important that health educators provide students multiple opportunities to recognize, voice, and cope with the physical, spiritual, and emotional challenges of dealing with the epidemic of gun violence in America.

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