

Public Health Association Of New Zealand

Policy On Gun Control

Revised version adopted by PHA AGM 27 June 2002

The Public Health Association notes that:

- Firearms have an important and legitimate role in New Zealand society. However there are however significant risks associated with misuse of firearms.
- There are, on average, 80 deaths and 65 hospital admissions each year as a result of intentional and unintentional use of firearms in New Zealand;
- The majority (78%) of deaths are completed suicide acts. Sixty per cent of non-fatal injuries are unintentional;
- Deaths from gunshot represent 4.5% of all injury mortality;
- Over fifty per cent of all serious firearm injuries result in death (compared with seven per cent of all serious road traffic injuries);
- Māori rates of hospitalisation for firearm related injuries are twice those of non-Māori. Death rates for non Māori are slightly higher than those for Māori.
- The majority of those killed or injured by firearms are men aged 15 – 24 years;
- Suicide attempts with firearms have an 83% per cent fatality rate;
- An average of 61 New Zealanders complete suicide using a firearm each year;
- Firearm crime is a subset of violent crime; and a positive relationship exists between levels of gun ownership and crime;
- Over half the reported 'serious assaults' with firearms in 1996 were in the family violence category, indicating the impact of firearms on people in the home.

The Public Health Association affirms the following principles:

Reducing the rates of unintentional and intentional injuries and death resulting from the misuse of firearms can most effectively be addressed by adoption of the following public health principles:

- A societal response, as well as individual responsibility;
- A response which recognises the multi-causal determinants relevant to the misuse of firearms and the need for comprehensive strategies in reducing such misuse;
- A focus on harm reduction and injury prevention; and
- An emphasis on strategies which are achievable and effective.

A societal response is appropriate as a response to arms misuse because gun ownership in New Zealand is widespread (210,000 New Zealanders hold a firearms licence: 8 per cent of the eligible population). Those affected by the misuse of guns are not necessarily the owners of the guns involved. Those killed and injured by criminal actions, or unintentional injuries, are affected by inadequate societal controls on firearms with little personal opportunity for influencing the risks. Consumer research polls indicate that 88 per cent of adult New Zealanders support the inclusion of the number of guns held by each firearm owner in licensing information, and 81 per cent agree with a ban on private ownership of military style semi-automatic weapons (MSSAs).

Accidental and intentional misuse of firearms is multi-causal. Any effective policy aimed at reducing their ill-effects should take this into account and combine a number of strategies in tackling the problem. Effective firearm injury prevention should comprise a number of strategies, in particular:

- Banning high-risk firearms
- Reducing ability of high-risk users to obtain firearms
- Banning or restricting high-risk uses
- Promoting acceptance of responsibility for the ownership and use of firearms.

The Public Health Association believes that following steps should be taken:

(1) *Effective legislation should be established to give effect to the Thorpe Report.* PHA supports the drafting of a new Firearms Act that would include the following factors recommended by Justice Thorp in 1997:

- Establishment of an independent Firearms Authority;
- Establishment of a combined registration and licensing system in which owners would be licensed to use specific firearms only, and required to be responsible for the use and safe custody of those firearms;
- Introduction of a shorter licensing period, with a requirement that permission is obtained prior to firearm purchase;
- Provision for buy-backs or deactivation of specified weapons
- Controlled sale of ammunition

(2) *Implementation of any new legislation should be effective:* any new Act should be effectively implemented by adequate resourcing of a new Firearms Authority, publicity, and appropriate communication strategies.

(3) *Addressing public concerns and allaying misconceptions:* Intersectoral strategies are needed to address public anxiety about the perceived relationship between mental illness or disability and firearm related injury and death.

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Bibliography

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Pha Gun Control 2002 Companion Paper

Key communication messages:

- PHA recognises the important and legitimate role of firearms in New Zealand society, particularly in agriculture, sport and recreation.
- PHA acknowledges the risks associated with firearm ownership and use as illustrated by high rates of unintentional injury and death in New Zealand, and also by incidents of violence and self-harm.
- There are on average, 80 deaths and 65 hospital admissions each year as a result of intentional and unintentional use of firearms in New Zealand.
- Although the majority of deaths are completed suicide acts, over half the non-fatal injuries are unintentional.
- Firearm crime is a subset of violent crime; and a positive relationship exists between levels of gun ownership and crime.
- Over half the reported 'serious assaults' with firearms in 1996 were in the family violence category, indicating the impact of firearms on people in the home.
- In addition to individual responsibility, reducing the impact of firearms on the health of New Zealanders requires a societal response that recognises that there are many factors associated with misuse of firearms.
- Successful strategies to reduce the impact of firearms on the health of New Zealanders will focus on harm reduction and injury prevention, and emphasise strategies that are achievable and effective.
- PHA supports drafting of a new Firearms Act which would include the following factors recommended by Justice Thorp in 1997:
 - Establishment of an independent Firearms Authority;

- Establishment of a combined registration and licensing system in which owners would be licensed to use specific firearms only, and required to be responsible for the use and safe custody of those firearms;
- Introduction of a shorter licensing period, with a requirement that permission is obtained prior to firearm purchase;
- Provision for buy-backs or deactivation of specified weapons
- Controlled sale of ammunition

Recommended PHA actions:

- Advocate for shifting of firearm regulation issues from the Law and Order to the Health parliamentary portfolio;
- Advocate for establishment of an independent firearms authority;
- Prepare information for the public and interested groups to set gun control issues within a public health context;
- Arrange for seminars and speakers on gun control issues from a public health perspective; and
- Support the need for further research to more clearly understand factors associated with intentional and unintentional firearm related injury in New Zealand.