

Doctors, nurses tell MPs scrapping long-gun registry a health risk

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OTTAWA - A group of emergency doctors, nurses and suicide prevention workers asked members of Parliament to vote against a federal bill that seeks to quash the long-gun registry.

The group says a significant drop in gun-related suicide since 1995 is evidence the registry works and scrapping it would set them back years in suicide prevention.

"Suicide, contrary to public opinion, is often an impulsive gesture," Dr. Alan Drummond of the Canadian Association for Emergency Physicians said Wednesday.

"Keeping guns away from depressed people is essential."

Drummond has never seen a handgun injury in his 27 years as an emergency physician in rural Ontario, but he's seen more than a few injuries and deaths inflicted by rifles and shot guns - most of them suicides.

"As a coroner I go to lots of gun-related suicides. I'm telling you it's difficult, it's gut-wrenching."

The majority of firearm deaths in Canada are suicides and the guns most often used are rifles and shotguns, the group wrote in an open letter to MPs Wednesday.

That's why the 61 organizations and medical professionals who signed the letter see gun registration as a public health issue rather than a crime control issue.

A private members bill introduced by Manitoba Conservative MP Candice Hoepfner seeks to scrap the long-gun registry. The bill has already passed two readings in the House of Commons with support from eight Liberal MPs and a third of the NDP caucus. A third passage will send it to the Senate where a Conservative plurality makes its adoption much more likely.

The long-gun registry has been highly divisive since its inception. A Canadian Press/Harris Decima poll released in November found 46 per cent of Canadians believe abolishing the long gun registry is a good idea, while 41 per cent think it's a bad idea.

The registry has been criticized for being inefficient, ineffective in reducing crime and massively overrun in cost.

Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff, who supports a reduction or elimination in penalties for long-gun owners but wants to keep the registry, has said he will force his MPs to vote against the bill when it comes up for its third and final reading.

"The Liberal leader is not fooling anyone with his proposals for unconstitutional amendments to Bill C-391," Minister of Public Safety Vic Toews said in the House of Commons Wednesday. "It is time to end the criminalization of our hunters and outdoor enthusiasts once and for all."

There may be more guns and stronger opposition to the registry in rural areas. But health experts point out that there are also higher rates of gun deaths in rural communities and western provinces.

"Firearm related injury is not an urban crime problem in downtown Toronto. These things happen in idyllic little communities like Perth," said Drummond, who is a physician at the Perth and Smiths Falls District Hospital.

Since the gun registry was implemented there has been a 23 per cent reduction in gun-related suicide and a 36 per cent reduction in the use of firearms in intimate partner violence, Drummond said.

He said people who are suicidal are often brought to the hospital by police who can alert doctors if the person has a gun in his or her home.

"Knowing that a patient owns a gun is extremely important and valuable information for us as we determine the future risk of suicide."

"We commonly ask the police to remove guns from the home of those identified at risk."

Gun-related suicide attempts are far more lethal than other methods. Gun users stand a 96 per cent chance of dying, while the lethality rate of drug overdose is six per cent.

Drummond said he is a gun owner himself and is not against gun ownership but he is an advocate for responsible use.

"Suicide usually affects young people with big lives ahead of them," he said. "And we know that with effective treatment for depression and mental illness that they can go on to lead productive lives."

"Every potential suicide victim counts."