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## Firearms Control and Injury Prevention : a good investment

Almost 7 years after Canada proclaimed its new Firearms legislation, the debate over licensing firearm owners and registering guns rages on, in spite of the strong evidence about its contribution to the safety of Canadians. With the registration deadline critics of the law redoubled their efforts, sometimes confusing the facts with their opinions, and the costs of the law have taken center stage.

But the costs of firearms licensing and registration are only one part of the equation. Firearms in the 1980s, cost Canadians more than 1,400 lives each year, including accidents, suicides and homicides. That is almost 4 per day and for every death, many more were injured and traumatized. Firearm death and injury were estimated to cost the Canadian economy and society over 6 billion per year (in 1993 dollars), a price tag that dwarfs the investment in firearms licensing and registration. The bulk of the investment to date, it is important to note, has been made in developing the systems and processes necessary to screen firearms owners for risk factors which we, as health professionals, identified as being critical.

Licensing firearm owners is critical to reduce the chances guns will be obtained by those who are a threat to themselves and others. We have fought for this law because the vast majority of firearm deaths in Canada occur when an ordinary law abiding citizen becomes suicidal or violent often under the influence of toxic substances. Registration is also essential to encourage accountability and to reduce the illegal gun trade. In comparison, there are approximately 3000 automobile fatalities each year in Canada and we invest heavily in trying to make our highways safer with little of the controversy surrounding gun control. To put the costs in context, the province of Quebec spent \$125 million just to inoculate its citizens against one strain of meningitis last year, after 85 cases occurred. New Brunswick spent almost half a billion dollars to make a road (called "Suicide Alley") safer, after 43 persons died over a 5 year period. During the same period in time more than 5000 Canadians were killed with firearms.

The most recent law is not yet fully implemented, but we have seen encouraging results from Canada's progressive strengthening of gun law. Both the Rt. Hon. Kim Campbell's legislation in 1991 (C-17) and the Hon. Allan Rock's legislation in 1995 (Bill C-68) focused on improving controls over rifles and shotguns. By 1998, firearm related deaths, in Canada reached a 30 year low of 996 firearm deaths and remained at 1006 in 1999, the last year for which we have complete data. The public health community is on the record saying that strengthening the laws has contributed to this decline. The research is abundant, reducing access to firearms reduces the lethality of suicide attempts and violence and also reduces unintentional injuries, particularly involving children.

The areas where we have seen the greatest progress are in the deaths associated with rifles and shotguns. Suicides with firearms, firearm murders of women, accidents and of course murders with rifles and shotguns have all declined more rapidly than other types of fatal injuries. In contrast, homicides with handguns, fuelled largely by the illegal trade, have remained relatively stable.

The Firearms Act allows for the rigorous screening of gun owners so that those who pose a threat to themselves or others do not have access to firearms. While guns are the third leading cause of death among 15-24 years old Canadians - following motor vehicle accidents and suicide by other means - in most cases, the firearm used was easily accessible in the home. The law specifically targeted rifles and shotguns, the firearms most often used in suicides, in unintentional injuries and in domestic violence. Given the law promotes notions of accountability among firearm owners which is essential in encouraging responsible behavior, it is clear that ultimately it will reduce deaths.

Our daily practice informs us of the risks associated with firearms. Indeed, that is why, health professionals have fought to pass improvements to the law in 1991 as well as the 1995 Firearms Act. It is clear that Canada's Firearms Act is essential to help prevent death and injury and make Canada a safer place to live. And it brings Canada in line with most industrialized countries as well as emerging international norms such as the 1997 resolution of the United Nations Crime Prevention and Criminal

Justice Commission. We know that on an international basis and within Canada there is a strong relationship between rates of firearms ownership and firearm death rates in industrialized countries. Switzerland, for example, with one of the highest rates of firearm ownership in Europe also has one of the highest rates of firearms death. As health professionals, we believe this legislation needs to be kept rigorous and effective. We know the importance of investing in prevention, whether in road safety or preventing infectious diseases.

We, as health professionals, cannot accept further compromise to public health and safety. We know there has been huge pressure to "streamline" and to cut costs on this program or even to abandon it altogether. Surely, however, the experience in Walkerton, Ontario, where the water supply was compromised, has taught us some lessons about what may occur when we lose sight of public health and safety objectives. It is true that one cannot easily measure prevention, but we can certainly measure the effects of ignoring it.

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