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COMMENTARY: PRIVATE GUN OWNERSHIP

Politics pushing anti-gun crusade

WHEN Congress cut \$2.6 million from the 1997 firearm research budget of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) it sent a message. For those activist medical researchers reluctant to hear it, the House Appropriations Committee spelled it out: "the committee does not believe it is the role of the CDC to advocate or promote gun control initiatives, or to discourage private responsible gun ownership." The committee further advised that the government's injury research should henceforth represent views from multiple scientific disciplines, not just medical doctors.

Center Director David Satcher came to the defense of the doctrinaire approach to restricting gun ownership. In a 1995 Washington Post editorial, Satcher lambasted critics of CDC's efforts and sought to blame them for the center's

troubles. But somehow he failed to address the flaws pointed out by other physicians and criminology scholars in CDC-sponsored firearms research. In the end, Congress didn't buy it.

Now David Satcher is the nominee for surgeon general. Should we be surprised? The Clinton administration continues to seek ways to use the public health system to re-engineer our private lives. Past surgeons general under Clinton have not been shy about using the post as a government-sponsored bully pulpit from which to preach against smoking and firearms.

There is little reason to believe that Satcher would not use the surgeon general's office to continue his crusade against private firearms ownership. Here are some points of CDC firearms policy articulated on Satcher's watch as director:

■ CDC director of gun research, Dr. Mark Rosenberg, stated in a Rolling Stone interview that he "envision[s] a long-term campaign . . . to convince Americans that guns are, first and foremost, a public health menace." Hardly the stuff of true science, which requires finding the facts before reporting the conclusions.

■ Rosenberg and other researchers under CDC authority have ignored 20 years of academic firearms research conducted by criminologists. Not

surprisingly, much of this work shows gun crime to be the work of a small minority of violent thugs, not of responsible gun owners. This finding is heresy to the CDC doctors, who view guns themselves as the problem — even those owned by law-abiding citizens.

■ CDC's 1993 pamphlet, Health Affairs, offers several strategies for preventing firearm injuries. Examples are the outright prohibition of gun ownership and restricting gun licenses to "only police, military, guards and so on." Constitutional considerations aside, those nostrums ignore the experience gained by the real experts on guns, the criminologists. Gun control does not reduce crime. And firearm accidents have been steadily decreasing for the last 60 years.

■ The CDC gave a grant (the exact amount has not been disclosed) to the Trauma Foundation, an anti-gun group, which used it to produce an anti-gun newsletter. The letter, What Advocates Can Do, advised readers to "organize a picket at gun manufacturing sites" and to "work for campaign finance reform to weaken the gun lobby's political clout." This tax-supported pamphleteering drew a complaint from Rep. Bob Barr, R-Georgia, and Satcher was forced to admit the grant violated anti-lobbying provisions and was inappropriate.

A recent CDC-funded article in the Archives of Internal Medicine indicates that CDC activists have not taken Congress's admonishment seriously. The article rehashes old data gathered for two earlier studies, both of which have been shown to be seriously flawed. Worse yet, the authors ignore the two most significant scholarly works on firearms self-defense in the last two years: the Lott and Mustard study from the University of Chicago, and the Kleck and Gertz study from Northwestern's Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology. Both studies make powerful cases for the lifesaving benefits of armed self-defense. This omission of contrary evidence is a well-established pattern of the CDC's gun research.

It is also unethical. The office of surgeon general requires fidelity to scientific process and the determination to put science above politics. The making of good science differs from the making of laws and sausages. Scientific research is orderly and dispassionate. If we permit its debasement for pushing gun control or any other cause celebre, we will end up with the science we deserve.

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