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OPINION

Yet another war against gun owners

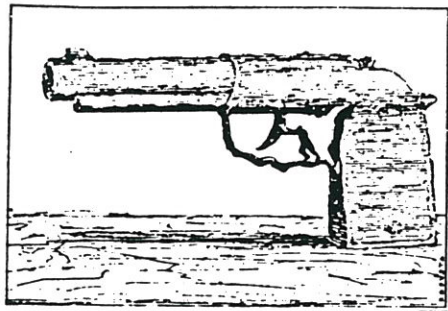
By Timothy Wheeler

Has medical science come to this? *The New England Journal of Medicine* has published an opinion poll, of all things, and held it up as proof that Americans really don't trust themselves around guns. When I was a medical student I relied on the *Journal* for the purest essence of medical truth — at least as close to the truth as science could get. But now it has become a spin-factory for the public health gun grabbers.

Frustrated by powerful new criminology research showing private gun ownership to be safe and protective against criminals, leading anti-gun public health writers (five of them lawyers) have banded together to present the results of a telephone survey done in 1996 and again a year later. The whole production has an aura of desperation — a last stand in the culture war against America's gun owners which the authors are rapidly losing. The Joyce Foundation, a charitable foundation known for bankrolling anti-gun advocacy, funded the poll.

Among 22 policy proposals trotted out by the authors are their perennial favorites: "childproof" guns, personalized guns, and loaded-chamber indicators. The authors' most obvious mistake is assuming that these measures are effective in reducing gun accidents. Most authorities on gun safety disagree, judging them either impractical or downright dangerous. Still, the authors push their unproved but "reasonable" proposals to an unsuspecting survey population.

It is virtually impossible to completely childproof a potentially dangerous consumer item without rendering it useless. Maybe we should take the wheels off bicycles and fill swimming pools with concrete, because bikes and swimming pools cause more accidental deaths combined than do firearms. Diligent parental supervision is still indispensable when kids are around any hazard. Part of parental risk management is safety education, which can be used to effectively gun-proof a child.



The personalization devices touted by the authors are mostly still in the idea stage. These theoretical devices would substitute one more gadget for good judgment and training. The authors admit that "personalized" guns, if they existed, would be more prone to malfunction, a literally fatal flaw in a self defense tool like a handgun. They don't mention how many more murders or completed rapes would result from critical failures of personalized self-defense guns, but it's likely to be substantial considering that Americans use guns as many as 2.5 million times annually in self defense.

Possibly the most dangerous proposal is the loaded-chamber indicator. Firearm instructors drill the lesson home for every novice: always assume a gun is loaded. Always look in the chamber yourself to confirm that it is empty, and therefore incapable of firing. The loaded-chamber indicator is yet another malfunction waiting to happen. Even worse, a shooter who relies on it would eventually skip the basic safety rule of looking directly in the chamber. That's how people learn firsthand the old lament, "I didn't know the gun was loaded."

The *Journal* poll misleads respondents by omitting material facts. Most gun accidents are the result of reckless behavior in 15- to 24-year-old males — the group most involved in criminal violence and in non-firearm accidents. Would the respondents have agreed to these dubious controls for everyone if they knew responsi-

ble gun owners rarely have accidents? Fatal gun accidents have been decreasing for the last six decades. Knowing this, would respondents have shared the survey authors' sense of urgency to "do something" about them?

Opinion polls can be biased, intentionally or not, to solicit support for absurd policies. The same pollsters who conducted the *Journal* study also did a survey of doctors published earlier this year in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*. About 90 percent of the surveyed doctors responded that "plastic guns" should be banned. The main problem here is that there is no such thing as a plastic gun, and there never has been.

The mythical utility of plastic gun-parts for would-be airline terrorists was debunked years ago (they do show up on X-ray). But the authors of the *Annals* study, also funded by the Joyce Foundation, resuscitated this myth and gave it a new life. How embarrassing for them.

In the end, the *New England Journal of Medicine* study offers us 22 new social engineering solutions: more government regulation of the many for the misdeeds of the few. It offers 22 new hurdles, in addition to those we already face, to everyday good citizens buying guns for self defense or other reasons. It offers 22 new ways for everyday good citizens to become status criminals because of one misstep in the legal minefield gun ownership has become. And real medical science suffers major structural damage, because you can no longer tell the real science from the politics.

The *Journal* authors never mentioned the one most effective way to childproof a gun: weld the barrel shut.

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