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## Public Health & Policy

# Meet the Doc Who Stopped CDC's Gun Violence Program

— Timothy Wheeler, MD, recalls his testimony before a House committee

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*As Congress debates an amendment that would allow the CDC to begin looking -- after a 19-year hiatus -- at the issue of preventing violence committed with guns, there is a doctor who remembers when the restriction was first put on the table.*

MedPage Today News Editor Joyce Frieden talked with [Timothy Wheeler, MD](#), a retired head-and-neck surgeon living in the Los Angeles area, about his involvement in the issue. Also see [this op-ed article](#) from the American College of Physicians' Bob Doherty.

### **MedPage Today: How did you first become involved with this issue?**

**Wheeler:** In [October] 1993, I was reading my copy of the *New England Journal of Medicine* and I saw an [article by Arthur Kellermann, MD](#), that claimed that having a gun in your home increases your risk of becoming a homicide victim by three times. This sounded completely wrong to me, and when I analyzed the article, I found out it was full of all kinds of errors.

This was only one example of a concerted effort in organized medicine against gun owners, so I founded [Doctors for Responsible Gun Ownership](#) (DRGO) in 1993. At this point we have about 1,500 members who are MDs, scientists, healthcare professionals, and others. Funding comes completely from member donations of \$35 per year.

I was also involved in organized medicine through the California Medical Association; I was a delegate to the CMA House of Delegates. I spoke up against their political

campaign against gun owners but was ignored. So I basically gave up trying to use my position in organized medicine and started taking my message to the people in the media outside of organized medicine, and that's when I got noticed -- by gun rights organizations and the media, including TV, radio, and [print].

### **What was your role in getting the Dickey amendment passed?**

**Wheeler:** In 1996, I was asked, along with three other medical doctors and a criminologist, to come to Washington and testify before the House Appropriations Committee about how the CDC had used taxpayer money to lobby for gun control. I showed the committee the Winter 1993 CDC publication, "[Public Health Policy for Preventing Violence](#)." It recommended two strategies for preventing firearm injuries -- "restrictive licensing" [i.e., only security professionals allowed to own firearms] and "prohibit ownership."\*

I also told them about the quotes from [P.W. O'Carroll, MD](#) -- he was the acting head of the Division of Injury Control at the CDC. He was [quoted in JAMA](#) [subscription required] on Feb. 3, 1989, as saying, "We are going to systematically build a case that owning firearms causes deaths. We are doing the most we can do given the political realities." He later said he'd been misquoted.

The Dickey amendment to the appropriations bill for 1997 ... it started out in different forms about defunding injury control in general, but it wound up focusing on a very narrow area -- it was not about stopping gun research. All that Congress did was to stop them from doing gun control advocacy at the CDC, [such as] accepting for publication obviously biased articles and rejecting any articles that found any positive benefits to gun ownership. This was a systematic approach to promoting and funding so-called "advocacy research" against gun ownership.

[Mark Rosenberg, MD](#), was O'Carroll's successor as the head of the division of injury prevention and control at the CDC. [That division] was the culprit in all of this -- not the divisions dealing with [infectious disease]. It was under him that most of this advocacy research was coordinated and promoted and funded.

Rosenberg was quoted in a [1994 Washington Post article](#) by William Raspberry entitled "Sick People with Guns" as wanting his agency to create a public perception of firearms as "dirty, deadly, and banned." So that was the third major piece of evidence that we presented to the House Appropriations Committee. That is the basis for our case, and that side of the story has been systematically, surgically removed from all media reports ever since.

### **Are you happy with the current policy on gun research?**

**Wheeler:** Yes, because there is an institutional bias against gun ownership at the CDC, so they can't be trusted to fund research that could affect firearm policy. What I would like to see continue is ongoing research, both federally and privately funded, done by real experts -- criminologists and sociologists. The federally funded research is done by the National Institute of Justice, the research and funding arm of the Justice Department. That research has been done all along.

### **How have recent events such as the shooting in California affected the controversy over this type of research?**

**Wheeler:** Any time there is a mass shooting -- and particularly with the terrorist attack in San Bernardino -- it provides another excuse for gun prohibitionists to push for CDC funding of gun research; what they don't tell you is why that CDC activity was stopped in the first place.

### **What is your position on the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) policy about guns?**

The American Academy of Pediatrics advises doctors to urge patients to remove guns from their homes. Gun ownership is one of our enumerated fundamental civil rights, so the AAP is telling doctors to urge patients to give up one of their basic civil rights. You will find that in their policy.\*\* They've been doing that for years.

### **Should physicians be allowed to carry guns at work?**

**Wheeler:** I think they should be allowed to. DRGO's membership director, [John Edeen, MD](#), has [written about this](#). We believe that gun-free zones are a child's fantasy that gets people killed.

*\*Editor's note: These two strategies were among a list of preventive strategies that the authors suggested needed evaluation. See pp. 18-19 of [the article](#).*

*\*\*Editor's note: The AAP's policy is more nuanced. [Read it here](#).*

**News Editor Joyce Frieden is a second cousin of CDC Director Tom Frieden. She did not talk to him regarding this article and speaks with him infrequently.**