

A Holistic Approach

An Interview with Chethan Sathya, MD, MSc, Director, Center for Gun Violence Prevention, Northwell Health

EDITORS' NOTE Dr. Chethan Sathya is a pediatric trauma surgeon and National Institutes of Health (NIH)-funded firearm injury prevention researcher. He serves as director of Northwell Health's Center for Gun Violence Prevention and oversees the health system's expansive approach to firearm injury prevention. Under Dr. Sathya's leadership, the center has leveraged the health system's diverse patient population and wide reach to implement ground-



Dr. Chethan Sathya

breaking preventative strategies and perform high-level research. Dr. Sathya was recently awarded \$1.4 million from the NIH to study gun violence prevention and implement a first-of-its-kind protocol to universally screen among those at risk of firearm injury. The grant is part of the health system's "We Ask Everyone. Firearm Safety is a Health Issue" research study, which aims to shift the paradigm to view gun violence as a public health issue and approach firearm injury risk similarly to other health risk factors that are part of routine care, like smoking, substance use and motor vehicle accidents. Furthermore, Dr. Sathya spearheaded the formation of the National Gun Violence Prevention Learning Collaborative for Hospitals and Health Systems, which is a multi-year, multi-phase platform in which hospitals and integrated health systems can learn about gun violence prevention from experts, engage in open dialogue, develop best practices through an iterative process, and implement and evaluate strategies for the prevention of firearm related injuries and deaths. Dr. Sathya has been an invited keynote speaker at a number of events, including the American Hospital Association Leadership Summit on Violence Prevention and the Healthcare Association of New York State symposium on best practices in gun violence prevention. In addition to being a surgeon, Dr. Sathya is associate trauma director at Cohen Children's Medical Center and assistant professor of surgery and pediatrics at the Donald and Barbara Zucker School of Medicine at Hofstra/Northwell. He completed medical school and general surgery training at the University of Toronto, followed by a Pediatric Surgery Fellowship at Northwestern Medicine in Chicago. He also holds a master's in clinical epidemiology from the University of Toronto, in

addition to completing a Fellowship in Global Journalism at the Munk School of Global Affairs and a Global Public Health program at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health.

What was the vision for Northwell Health creating the Center for Gun Violence Prevention and how do you define its mission?

We believe that gun violence is one of the major public health crises that is facing America. If you look at the leading causes of death year after year, one is gun violence. In fact, last year gun violence overtook motor vehicle accidents as the number one leading cause of death in children. That is a very stark statistic. It is clear that we have been dealing with COVID-19 which is a public health crisis, but we must remember that gun violence has been a public health crisis for many years and the trend has only gotten worse. We use this as the basis for why we formed the Center, and our strategy is to use a public health approach to prevent gun violence and curb the number of hospital admissions due to firearm injuries.

We take a multipronged approach to addressing this issue. We are trying to identify risk factors for gun violence, evaluate interventions in a healthcare setting that we know might work, and partnering with communities. We have five main working groups at the Center: medical education, policy advocacy, research, clinical integration, and community outreach. Each of these working groups tackle different elements of public health in respect to gun violence which is required for a holistic approach. I should emphasize that research is critical in this effort, and firearm research is vastly underfunded even though firearms are a leading cause of death. The amount of funding for firearm research is dwarfed compared to research for cancer and heart disease, and research is essential to have the data and statistics when evaluating initiatives.

It is also important to be clear in our messaging that we are focused on gun violence as a public safety issue. This is not about the Second Amendment and the reality is that most gun owners are supportive of gun safety measures which is a message that is often lost. This is not about taking people's guns

away – it is about making the environment safer, and responsible gun owners want an environment that is safer, just like a non-gun owner does. There is actually a lot of common ground on this since people want to live in a safe community.

Are you optimistic that real change can happen on this critical issue?

I am optimistic and I think we have moved the needle quite a lot. When we started this journey, for example, there was no federally funded research on this issue. Northwell Health has one of the first Center's to receive NIH funding and we are rolling out an important universal screening program where we ask about firearm injury risk. We were only able to do this because of our CEO, Michael Dowling, who took a lead on this issue. This has helped build momentum in addressing gun violence as a public health issue.

There was also no healthcare industry-wide forum to discuss best practices and implementing health strategies to reduce gun violence in different hospital settings which is why we launched the Learning Collaborative in April 2021 which now has 400 participants from health systems across 35 states which is the largest collaboration of its kind. All of these health systems and hospitals are coming together in this effort which is a big push forward.

You have been a powerful voice and advocate for firearm injury prevention throughout your career. Where did this passion develop and what has made this issue so important to you?

I started my journey in Chicago as a trauma surgeon and I was horrified by the number of babies and children that I was having to treat with bullet wounds – it is something that is heartbreaking to witness. You think about your own kids and your own communities, and it is devastating to see what parents go through when they lose a child to firearm injury. How can you not act and how can this not be one of the most important things you care about? This is where it started for me and I was very fortunate to have the opportunity to come to an organization like Northwell that has prioritized this issue at the highest level. I am so proud to be a part of Northwell and to be a part of an organization that acts on its principles and is willing to take a leadership role on important public health issues. ●