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The Vice President  
Eisenhower Executive Office Building  
Washington, DC 20501

January 9, 2013

Dear Mr. Vice President:

Thank you and the President for making gun violence a priority issue for the country. We appreciate the opportunity to help find ways to reduce the thousands of gun-related deaths and injuries that happen in America every year. We ask that the Administration and Congress approach this issue with urgency as a major public health crisis threatening the health and well-being of Americans – an issue that requires a multi-pronged approach immediately and in the long-term.

The terrible tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School on December 14 brings to surface the daily tragedies due to gun violence that we see as health care professionals. Every day that goes by without action, 87 more people die – 30,000 deaths every year.

Doctors for America is a national movement of over 16,000 doctors and medical students and thousands of additional supporters including other health professionals who are working together to improve the health of the nation and to ensure that everyone has access to affordable, high-quality health care. Our members draw from their diverse experience caring for patients in all 50 states, across specialties from primary care to surgical subspecialties, in settings from rural clinics to inner city emergency departments to academic centers.

In just two weeks, we have gathered signatures and stories from thousands of individual physicians, nurses, and other health professionals in all 50 states who agree: it is time for Congress to pass gun safety legislation immediately and for us to develop a comprehensive national plan to stop gun violence.

As health care professionals, we know that all too often, there is little we can do once an event has already occurred. Dr. Lucy Truman knows this well: “I live in Sandy Hook, Newtown, CT, and we are grieving. By a horrible coincidence, in 1996, I was working in A&E (ER) on the morning of the Dunblane Massacre in Scotland – waiting for casualties – that never arrived. 15 children aged 5-6 years old were killed. To witness these two awful, awful events in my lifetime seems unbelievable.”

The fact is that beyond mass shootings, we know that every day there are lives, families, and communities shattered by gun violence:

“Handguns killed all the children I saw as a Florida neurosurgeon, including a baby shot while on the scene of a drug deal gone sour, a drive-by shooting of a top teenage athlete by envious neighbors and a 3-year-old shot by a seven-year-old with a gun left around a day care center.” – Dr. Philip Levitt, Florida

“Too many times, I have seen children's lives radically changed because of senseless gun violence, such as a 12-year-old girl who had to endure years of physical therapy to regain the ability to walk after being accidentally shot in the head at 5 years old.” – Dr. Victoria Chen, New York

For many who signed our petition, the issue of gun violence has reached not only patients but family and colleagues as well:

On New Year's Day just two days ago, Dr. Anna Tran – pediatrician in Dallas and mother of three – learned that her uncle was shot in the back and robbed. He died several hours later simply because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“Our community lost the manager of our Neonatal Intensive Care Unit when she was hit by a stray bullet on her way home from work, and people were too afraid to open their doors to help her, so she bled to death.” -- Dr. Mary Beth Miotto, Massachusetts

“A stray bullet killed a beautiful, young pediatric nurse in my community as she was riding home from a 4th of July celebration in the car with her husband and two children. There are many more stories like this that don't make headlines.” -- Dr. Deborah Leiner of Greensboro, NC

“I am a physician and a parent of two children. I also lost my father in 1979 when he was held up and murdered by a 16 year old that happened to get one of the many guns in circulation in our country. I do not want my children to end up on either end of a bullet!” -- Dr. Amy Banks, Massachusetts

**In response to these daily tragedies, we propose an ambitious goal for the nation: cut gun-related deaths in half by 2020.**

We need significant changes in policy and practice to achieve this goal. The rate of deaths due to gun violence has remained virtually unchanged in the past 10 years (declining from 10.3 (2000) to 10.2 (2010) deaths per 100,000 people per year) after declining significantly in the 1990's from 14.6 (1990) to 10.2 (1999).

We propose a multi-pronged approach in order to save thousands of lives a year. The circumstances and causes of gun-related injuries and death are diverse – mass shootings, suicides, individual disputes, robberies, and accidents. There is no single provision that will stop these tragedies from happening, so we must approach the issue from all available angles – just as we have successfully approached other threats to public health such as motor vehicle accident deaths and deaths from fire and drowning.

We propose addressing gun violence in several ways:

**1. Remove military-style guns and ammunition that are designed to be able to kill large numbers of people quickly. There may be a place in war for such weapons, but they represent a threat to public safety in our neighborhoods.**

Medications and medical devices are pulled from the market when their risks outweigh their benefits. So should we rethink the weapons that we allow on our streets.

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Specific approaches should include:

- A federal ban on the sale of assault weapons and ammunition – to stop weapons from being added to the existing stock
- Buyback programs – to reduce the number of military-style weapons that are currently in circulation

## **2. Strengthen safety measures and regulations for guns used for hunting, sport, and self-protection.**

Pharmacies track and limit the purchase of pseudoephedrine to prevent the manufacture of crystalline methamphetamine. Every state requires a driver's license and car registration in order to drive, and physicians certify those who should no longer drive because they would be a grave danger to themselves and others. We should approach the purchase, transfer, and operation of guns and ammunition with similar rigor.

Specific approaches should include:

- Universal background checks and licenses for anyone purchasing guns and ammunition – including mandatory firearm safety training and testing and regulation of private sales and transfers of guns and ammunition
- Mandatory waiting periods of at least 48 hours
- Limits on the purchase of ammunition
- Better policing of neighborhoods with a high concentration of gun violence

## **3. Remove prohibitions and barriers that keep health professionals from protecting our patients from harm.**

One of our most important tasks as health care providers is to counsel our patients about how to take care of themselves and prevent disease and injury. We counsel patients about tobacco cessation, educate them about diet, and remind them to wear seatbelts and sunscreen.

Yet gun violence is an area where both state and federal policies have prohibited us from doing our job. Research shows that having a gun at home markedly increases risk of injury and suicide. Despite this, legislators in multiple states have sought to prevent physicians from assessing that risk by limiting what physicians can talk about with their patients.

Similarly, especially when it comes to suicide risk, we have far too few resources to adequately treat patients with those mental illnesses.

Specific approaches should include:

- Prohibit laws preventing physicians from discussing gun safety with patients.
- Remove the provision in the Affordable Care Act and other federal policies that prohibit physicians from documenting gun ownership.
- Invest in improving access to mental health resources.

## **4. Remove prohibitions that impede valuable research and data-tracking related to gun violence and firearm safety.**

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In caring for our patients, we rely on unbiased data and research in public health to guide our counseling, recommendations, or treatments. Just as we monitor vaccinations and different approaches to tobacco cessation and fund approaches to preventing cancer, so should we ensure that we have the data-tracking and research capabilities to fully address gun violence.

Specific approaches should include:

- Reinstating CDC and NIH funding for firearms injury and death prevention research.
- Removing restrictions in the Affordable Care Act and other legislation that prohibits databases and data collection on gun violence programs.
- Ensuring that newly implemented programs are studied carefully to assess impact.

Please note that we strongly believe the need for more research should not be used as an excuse to delay action. We already know enough to start putting measures in place to reduce gun violence. We need to implement solutions while ensuring that we have adequate research funding to track and improve their effectiveness.

**5. Create a Presidential advisory committee of various stakeholders, including health care providers, to make recommendations to the President and Congress and monitor progress on cutting gun deaths in half by 2020.**

Gun violence touches far too many Americans. The causes and solutions are complex and multi-faceted. But all of us have a responsibility to stop gun violence.

As health care professionals who are confronted with the human cost of gun violence every day, we are unwavering in our belief that strong measures to reduce gun violence must be taken immediately. We strongly urge the Obama administration and Congress to put legislation in place now and develop a comprehensive plan to reduce gun-related injuries and deaths. We look forward to continuing to work with you on this critical issue.

Sincerely,



Vivek Murthy, MD MBA  
President and Co-Founder



Alice Chen, MD  
Executive Director

cc: The Honorable Kathleen Sebelius