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Suicide, With No Warning

By ELISABETH ROSENTHAL



TO his large, loving family and many friends, Kerry Lewiecki was an optimist and problem-solver, with a big laugh and impressive hugs. Early in the summer of 2010, he graduated from the University of Oregon with dual degrees in law and conflict resolution; invitations went out for his August wedding to his longtime girlfriend.

Then, just a few weeks later, within the span of a few hours, he bought a gun and shot and killed himself, at age 27. His father, Mike, a doctor in Albuquerque, who still chokes up when he recalls that day, said: “We had no clue he was desperate. I don’t think he’d ever shot a gun before.”

Support for stricter gun laws is growing, impelled by a year of grisly mass murders — at a movie theater in Aurora, Colo., an elementary school in Newtown, Conn., and, most recently, by a vengeful former policeman in California. Last month, President Obama kicked off a continuing national debate by proposing an array of new policies, including an assault weapons ban, an expansion of background checks and restrictions on high-capacity magazines.

But more than 60 percent of gun-related deaths in the United States are suicides, like Mr. Lewiecki’s. Reducing that statistic will most likely take different interventions than are currently proposed — like waiting periods and safe storage requirements — and those are not even on the table.

While background checks might turn up people with severe mental illness who have been prone to violence, gun suicides are often committed by people whose history doesn't suggest a serious problem. In studies, a quarter to a third of those who killed themselves were not in contact with a psychiatrist at the time of death, and the majority were not on psychiatric medicines. "The first time the family may know of the distress is when they kill themselves," said Dr. David Gunnell, a suicide epidemiologist at the University of Bristol in England. There may be no red flags and little forethought. To carry out a campus killing rampage, perpetrators collect weapons, identify victims and select locations. In contrast, suicides are often solitary, impulsive acts, experts say.

That is why a cornerstone of suicide prevention is simple: "restricting access to common and particularly lethal means for everyone — we know that's effective," said Dan Reidenberg, executive director of SAVE (Suicide Awareness and Voices of Education), a national suicide prevention group.

That means different things in different places. In Britain, suicide prevention efforts in the late 1990s involved banning the sales of large bottles of paracetamol (known as Tylenol in the United States), which had been used in tens of thousands of suicide attempts each year. When I was reporting from China a decade ago, rural officials responded to an epidemic of suicide among women by restricting pesticide sales.

In the United States, we build barriers on bridges, but have fewer barriers to the quick access to guns: "In the U.S. one of the most straightforward things to do to prevent suicide is to make firearms less accessible," Dr. Gunnell said. The Lewiecki family believes that Kerry might well be alive if there had been a waiting period before purchase in Oregon. Studies suggest that far fewer American teenagers would commit suicide if gun owners were required to use trigger locks. Seventy-five percent of the guns used in youth suicides and unintentional injuries were accessible in the home or the home of a friend.

Psychiatrists first started focusing on how much the ready availability of lethal means affected suicide rates after a fortuitous experiment in England. When the country switched its heating from coal to natural gas in the 1970s, suicide rates plummeted, because the fumes were not as deadly; gas has a far lower carbon monoxide content. Sri Lanka developed the highest suicide rate in the world in the 1980s, following the introduction of pesticides on a mass scale. Once the government removed the most toxic compounds, like Paraquat (lethal in 70 percent of cases) suicide rates dropped 50 percent, though the number of attempts dropped by less.

Studies show that once a convenient lethal method is removed, many do not seek other options. "If people go to the Golden Gate Bridge and encounter a barrier, they don't go to the Bay Bridge and try there," Dr. Reidenberg said.

INDEED, many people who commit suicide are more momentarily desperate than classically depressed, experts say. In Sri Lanka, “pesticide was often taken after an argument with a parent or a spouse,” said Dr. Gunnell, who studied that epidemic.

Up to 50 percent of people who attempt suicide make the decision to do so within minutes to an hour before they act, studies have found. They may be depressed or have contemplated suicide, “but the final decision comes very quickly, and there’s often ambivalence up to the moment,” Dr. Reidenberg said.

Although SAVE has not taken a specific policy position on firearms, it maintains that guns, just like dangerous medicines, should be safely stored.

But putting time between a suicidal impulse and getting a loaded gun in hand may be hard to legislate in the United States. A 2008 Supreme Court decision struck down a Washington, D.C., law that required weapons to be stored disassembled or to have trigger locks on the grounds that the law interfered with the right to self-defense; a handful of states still mandate the safety features. While the 1993 Brady Violence Prevention Act required a five-day waiting period for a background check before firearms purchases, the provision expired in 1998 and checks are now done through the Internet-enabled National Instant Check System, in minutes.

Would a wait have deterred Kerry Lewiecki? In law school he had developed severe pain in his hands, arms and back that was not responding well to treatment. Despite that, he enjoyed weekends with his fiancée, and they spoke on the morning of his death. That same day he mailed books to his parents’ home, in preparation for a Father’s Day visit.

Said his father, “If it had not been so easy to buy a gun maybe he would have spoken with someone or woken up the next morning and heard the birds and felt better.”

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