

One of the most frustrating aspects of practicing medicine is dealing with non-compliant patients. Fortunately, most of the time when patients are non-compliant they are only harming themselves.

The one group of patients that this is not always true for is untreated psychiatric patients. While the majority of psychiatric patients do not present any threat a sub-population of psychiatric patient's do.

In Connecticut, there are far more restrictions on gun owners than there are on potentially dangerous mental patients. In Connecticut, there are limits to our constitutional right to bear arms, but it is practically a civil right to be psychotic.

This is the frightening reality that we all must face in the wake of the tragedy in Newtown; the government cannot protect us from random acts of violence. They may do a very good job of investigating your death, but not a very good job of preventing it. If you are sitting in a movie theater, a church, a shopping mall, a restaurant or any other public place there is no protection against a terrorist or a mental patient who is only interested in killing a large number of people. The only time that mass killings are ever stopped is when someone else has a gun.

The left is sure to push further legislation that will make it more difficult for law-abiding citizens to purchase or carry guns. This will do little or nothing to prevent mass killings. This will give potential killers the peace of mind of knowing that they are less likely to be stopped or killed by an armed victim.

If politicians feel that they must act in the wake of this tragedy, they may want to look at the fact that Connecticut is one of only six states that does not allow the forced treatment of psychiatric patients outside of the hospital.

In Connecticut the only way to force a person with mental illness to get treatment is with civil commitment to a psychiatric hospital. In order to obtain a civil commitment, a doctor must determine that a patient is either an imminent threat to himself, a threat to others or is gravely disabled. After that paperwork is completed, a patient may be remanded to a psychiatric hospital. The patient then may either sign in voluntarily or request a hearing before a judge. If the judge agrees, the patient may be kept in the hospital for a period of time. If the patient refuses to take the recommended medication a second hearing is needed to forcibly medicate the patient. Once the patient has sufficiently improved, and is discharged from the hospital, the judicial order for forced medication ends and there is no way to force the patient to be treated.

Meeting the criteria for inpatient psychiatric treatment is often difficult. For the Newtown killer to have been hospitalized prior to this attack, he almost would have had to go to an emergency department with a gun in his hand making threats.

Even New York law has acknowledged that psychotic patients often must be forced to receive treatment. Unfortunately, this law did not pass until after Kendra Webdale was pushed to her death, by an untreated schizophrenic. Kendra's law received widespread support, but was opposed by the New York Civil Liberties Union.

The result of Kendra's law has been dramatic. Of the patient's who are compelled into assisted outpatient treatment fewer are arrested, fewer become homeless, fewer abuse drugs or alcohol, fewer attempt suicide and fewer require psychiatric hospitalization. This law has helped patients with mental illness get the care that they need and has made the public safer.

Connecticut has no law requiring patients with psychiatric illness to get help until they become an imminent danger. If lawmakers feel they must act following this tragedy they should correct this problem. The state of Connecticut should join the more than 40 states that mandate outpatient treatment for potentially dangerous psychiatric patients. This would improve public safety and the lives of the mentally ill.

Frank J. Mongillo, II, MD
26 Elm Street
New Haven, CT 06510
(203) 776-6845 (office)
(203) 640-2030 (cell)
frankMongillo@mac.com