

Helplessness

Category: Gun Violence

written by Ellen Zhang | July 27, 2022

As I examined the strength in my patient's legs, I noticed some scar-like indentations on his right thigh. Pausing, I asked Rob how he'd gotten them. "I got shot," he responded

I nodded calmly, while I summoned up Rob's medical history. I recalled that he was on medications for PTSD. As my mind connected these dots, I asked, "What happened?"

"I was getting groceries out of my truck. Two people were shooting at each other, and they shot me." His tone was casual, as if he were recalling what he'd had for lunch. I asked if this was the origin of his PTSD, and he nodded.

I finished Rob's full neural examination and then moved on to see the rest of my patients. Only after I got home, made dinner, and sat down to eat did I have a chance to gather my thoughts about Rob. I had only been taking care of him for a couple of days. He lived in an underserved part of Boston where gun violence was not uncommon. He had been pleasant to work with from the onset; I would have never imagined the pain and trauma that lay under his calm exterior. I was struck, judging from his tone, by how he'd just taken in stride being shot. I realized that gun violence must happen often for him to be so nonchalant about the experience.

This interaction with Rob took place not long after the Oxford High School shooting in Michigan. That incident made a particular impression on me, since Oxford High School is in the same county where my younger brother went to school. I remember my fear and anxiety upon hearing of that event, and my sense of relief knowing my brother was safe. I also felt helpless, when my brother's high school canceled several days of classes after gun threats emerged on his campus.

Helplessness is what I also felt when I heard Rob's story. It is a great tragedy that his story is not unique. Gun violence is not equal—it more often impacts those who are most socioeconomically disadvantaged, like Rob. I grieve for a nation where gun laws, mask wearing, and vaccinations have become political matters.

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