



CASE STUDY

FRAGMENTING BULLETS

Issue

General public's access to armor-piercing and plastic polymer bullets, which fragment on impact.

ACEP Position

The Connecticut College of Emergency Physicians (CCEP) has sent a proposal banning fragmenting bullets to ACEP requesting a policy statement.

Background Information

Penetrating trauma remains a leading cause of death in young people. Handgun usage is epidemic in the country's inner cities. Gun control measures remain extremely difficult to legislate because of opposition by the National Rifle Association (NRA). Alternative legislative measures, eg, taxing ammunition or modifying it to make it safer, have been suggested.

In the fall of 1995, an Alabama inventor made national news in describing "Rhino-ammo," a plastic polymer-tipped bullet with a concave head. It is designed to break into multiple fragments on impact.

Its packaging claims, "Each of these fragments becomes lethal shrapnel and is hurled into vital organs, ie, the lungs, circulatory system components, the heart and other tissues." The manufacturer was quoted as saying, "It causes a horrific wound. That's not by accident. It's engineered by design. The round

disintegrates as it hits. There's no way to stop the bleeding."

Legislative History in Connecticut

The CCEP Board of Directors voted unanimously to condemn this type of ammunition. Because of the additional surgical problems such a wound causes, the Board determined that emergency physicians should initiate and lead the fight against these bullets.

The State Legislative Office was contacted regarding information on this topic. Because it was a relatively new issue, limited information was available and ACEP didn't have a formal position at that time. CCEP was referred, however, to Hand Gun Control, Inc. Information from that group included an article from Olympia, Washington, showing that similar bullets had been available for several years, but had not been publicized. Research of Connecticut state laws revealed no laws restricting this ammunition, although a federal law from 1986 banned the manufacture of metal alloy (eg Teflon) armor-piercing ammunition. With this information, CCEP members thought it appropriate to pursue a legislative ban on plastic polymer fragmenting bullets.

CCEP's first concern was to get a champion within the Connecticut Legislature. In 1993, CCEP successfully supported a bill banning assault weapons in the state. The bill subsequently was challenged in court, but vigorously defended by the state Attorney

General. He was contacted and was in full agreement with CCEP's position. From this initial contact, the Co-Chair of the Judiciary Committee was also found to be in favor of such a ban and sponsored one of two bills that were eventually heard before the Judiciary Committee.

The Attorney General's public hearing statement was well publicized in the press and drew more attention to the issue. CCEP's testimony concentrated on the medical concerns that would not have been discussed otherwise. The public hearings were well received with little dissent from the committee; however, CCEP members were disappointed that these bills were never voted on. CCEP is certain that they would have received a positive vote if presented for a floor vote to the House or Senate.

In retrospect, the bill probably was not voted on because of lack of a second champion within the committee. Those in favor of the bill, including the Attorney General, had gotten "political mileage" and press from it during the hearings and had nothing further to gain by getting it passed. CCEP plans to sponsor the bill again during the next legislative session, which is an election year. CCEP members hope that the bill will give many legislators a chance to show a "tough-on-crime" position on a fairly straightforward issue.

Arguments in Favor of this Position

- The extent of any bullet's path becomes suspicious if fragmenting bullets become commonly available because this type of bullet cannot be identified by its entrance wound.
- Plastic polymers might be more difficult to pick up on an x-ray, thereby

decreasing the efficacy of an important diagnostic tool.

- Although the increased destruction would translate into greater loss of life, it would also cause even greater disability from non-mortal wounds.
- Fragmenting bullets pose a greater risk to the trauma surgeon because of the multiple fragments that could easily puncture a glove. A fragmenting bullet is an emergency physician's /trauma surgeon's nightmare.

Arguments Against the Position (Provided by the NRA lobbyist)

- It is a defensive bullet, allowing civilians who may be inaccurate marksmen to stop their assailant regardless of where they hit.
- It is a safer bullet because it stays within the person it hits and doesn't pass through to ricochet into another person.
- These hearings call attention to the fact that police wear bulletproof vests, thereby endangering law enforcement personnel.

Potential Proponent Organizations

Emergency Nurses Association, Hand Gun Control, Inc. National Organization for Women, Connecticut Coalition Against Gun Violence, and Physicians for a Violence-Free Society.

Potential Opponent Organizations

NRA, munitions manufacturers.

For more information on this issue,
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