A handgun in the home

Is the protection afforded worth the risk?

BY HARRISON H. FARLEY, M.D.

I was just beginning my surgical career in 1962, when I was asked to change a gastrostomy feeding tube in a child. I gathered a Foley catheter and kit from the supply room and with one of the nurses went to see the patient.

On entering the boy’s room in the B building of Swedish Hospital in Minneapolis, I was startled at the sight of a child with an enormous hydrocephalic head, with his eyes upturned and unseeing, propped against the headboard. The nurse was accustomed to caring for this patient, and she showed loving concern toward him. I proceeded to go about changing his tube and while doing so tried to communicate with him. It was as if I were talking to a manikin; he made little response to whatever I said or did. Although the procedure itself was simple and went smoothly, the visit was distressing.

Curious, I checked into the details of this case. I learned the boy’s injury resulted from an accident in the home of a happy well-to-do couple two years ago. It was an accident with terrible repercussions. The boy’s father, fearing a home break-in, kept a loaded revolver in the drawer of his nightstand for protection. One afternoon his two sons, ages 2 and 7 years, were innocently playing upstairs, running from room to room. For some reason they entered their parents’ bedroom. The older boy, as a curious child of 7 is apt to do, opened the nightstand drawer. He saw the revolver, picked it up, playfully pointed it at the head of his brother—and, in jest, pulled the trigger.

The bullet exploded across the toddler’s head. He survived emergency surgery, but his head began to swell. The fact that his cranial sutures were not yet fused undoubtedly allowed for the swelling and prevented herniation of the brain stem. This probably saved his life, but at a tremendous cost, for permanent hydrocephalus resulted.

The older brother was distraught at what had happened from a prank gone wrong, and to make matters worse his father blamed him for the incident. The boy became deeply depressed and eventually required hospitalization and long-term psychiatric care.

The mother and father had great difficulty relating to their youngest son and their visits to the facility where he lived became infrequent. The mother blamed the father and shut herself off from him. The father began to seek solace in alcohol and became severely depressed himself, so much so that he became unable to work. Their marriage fell apart.

I was thoroughly upset after that hospital visit. I had a .38 special in my own house. Although I had taken precautions against just such an accident occurring, I asked myself whether the protection the gun afforded was worth running the risk of such a calamity. One can be critical of the father’s judgment in keeping a loaded gun at his bedside; but if a gun is to provide significant protection, it must be handy and probably loaded. In any case, I got rid of mine. A gun has no mind of its own. It can kill or maim without remorse. I have nothing against anyone wanting to protect self and family with a handgun, but they should carefully weigh the risks before doing so. MM

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