Week of September 14, 2015 – Gun Violence in America

Something that I have always tried to do when deciding on a safety topic is to refrain from introducing any type of political philosophy into the discussion. I suppose such topics as the Ebola crisis and sexually transmitted diseases can be viewed as political; but that depends on how the subject matter is handled. Even discussing the lack of corporate commitment to worker safety and health, as such a lack of commitment compromises monetary gains, could be considered as politically-induced: even though this is a very important topic within the occupational S&H community. Yet, while these topics sit on the fringe of S&H and individual belief systems, it seems that S&H professionals have made a concerted effort to avoid discussing the ever-increasing rate of senseless violence within our communities. While such occurrences typically involve guns, bombings as well as other types of weapons have played a significant role in community disturbances. Nevertheless, if one can discuss workplace violence (a prominent topic at many safety conferences, such as the annual American Society of Safety Engineers and the National Safety Council Safety Congress), it seems almost a contradiction for S&H professionals to ignore that acts of random violence that is becoming an ever-increasing problem in our communities.

Maybe violence against our citizens has always been occurring and it is only due to our advancements in communications technology that this issue is coming to the forefront of our political agenda. After all, we now know that spousal abuse and violence against women and children is not a 21st century phenomenon, suddenly appearing due to some new attitude or paradigm shift in our personal values. Such actions have been happening throughout history; it is only because of an increased empowerment of individuals that many have been determined to make these issues a national and even global priority.

So maybe gun violence in America is really nothing new. After all, gunfights in the Old West and clashes between unions and businesses in the first half of the 20th century were not uncommon. And organized crime has always been tied to extreme cases of violence. Just take a look at America's most popular movie genre where such scenarios play out on a more-than-frequent basis where such backdrops always seem to grab our (morbid) sense of interest while guaranteeing high box office sales. Indeed, we seem to glorify such settings. And maybe, just maybe, when we hear of random acts of violence, the perpetrators see their actions as glorious in much the same manner as we are mesmerized by Al Pacino's performance in the Godfather when his character, Michael Corleone, shoots and kills the crooked police chief and a rival mobster (McCluskey and Sollozzo) in the famous restaurant scene.

However when we subscribe to the notion that our current crisis of random gun violence is nothing new, such a position can only disguise the reality that America is indeed in the midst of an epidemic and, if we do not find a cure for this disease, we may be headed down a fateful road, much the same as the destructive capacity that the black plaque had on Europe during the middle ages or the crumbling internal societal structures that caused the great civilizations in the past to decay.

In the world of occupational S&H, it is considered standard practice that once a hazard has been identified, an assessment of that hazard needs to be conducted, followed by implementing an effective control based on that assessment. In much the same manner, community safety concerns need to be addressed. If this current wave of violence is not being perceived as a real issue, this condition (or hazard) will go unchecked without any type of control and therefore, the obvious consequences shall continue. In the workplace, leaving an identified hazard without a proper evaluation and subsequent control would result in serious consequences; the most obvious being, having workers susceptible to injury and illnesses. This is an unacceptable practice and could result in a contractor losing work and quite possibly, not being allowed to bid on new upcoming projects as their safety record – elevated OSHA injury rates and insurance experience modification rates, etc. - would preclude their participation.

In the case of guns, proponents of the 2nd amendment insist that it is not the guns that do harm, but rather it is the person. And to acknowledge this statement, one only has to remember the fateful day of September 11, 2001, where three planes were hijacked in midair by men with box cutters – not guns – and caused one more day of infamy in the history of the United States.

Nevertheless, it seems that, in general, that a gun in the wrong hands can cause a greater magnitude of damage in such a short period of time, when compared to other hand weapons. In addition, the response time for a victim to react and protect him/her as well as others in the area, is also significantly reduced and therefore, the opportunity to minimize consequences is significantly reduced.

Without a doubt, a responsible person would not use a gun to cause such harm to others. Yet, somehow, guns are winding up in the hands of persons that, only after-the-fact, are recognized as mentally or emotionally irresponsible or unstable. So maybe the question and answer to America's current epidemic of gun violence lies somewhere in our ability to identify persons with mental or emotional problems. One of the current barriers towards recognizing mental illness is that there still remains a considerable stigma associated with this condition. As such, there is reluctance for those suffering from mental illness to seek treatment. Another possible barrier towards controlling mental health in the U.S may rest on our health care system where many medical plans offer limited or no coverage to help persons needing assistance. While treatment for common illnesses are generally covered in full (properly treating an illness to the point of wellness), mental/emotional problems are dealt with by offering a limited number of professional visits; after which, the individual must pay all expenses out-of-pocket.

Obviously, there is much more that needs to be done to try to understand and control our current crises of gun violence in America. However, the first thing that needs to be done is to acknowledge or identify that there is a problem. As long as we, as a people, cannot come to grips with this, the senseless killings of innocent people will continue to happen. It can only be hoped that this does not continue so that such incidents are accepted as common occurrences and no longer are considered important enough to be considered news.

We are made wise not by the recollection of our past, but by the responsibility for our future.
George Bernard Shaw