

BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL

SATURDAY 4 JULY 1981

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We may return unduly long letters to the author for shortening so that we can offer readers as wide a selection as possible. We receive so many letters each week that we have to omit some of them. Letters must be signed personally by all their authors. We cannot acknowledge their receipt unless a stamped addressed envelope or an international reply coupon is enclosed.

Correspondents should present their references in the Vancouver style (see examples in these columns). In particular, the names and initials of all authors must be given unless there are more than six, when only the first three should be given, followed by et al; and the first and last page numbers of articles and chapters should be included. Titles of papers are not, however, included in the correspondence section.

The air rifle: a dangerous weapon

SIR,—To quote the comedian Max Boyce, "We talk of peace and goodwill but what do we go and buy for our children—toy guns and tanks. I ask you!"

In his short report of a potentially lethal air-gun injury (6 June, p 1834) Mr Andrew J G Batch claims that airgun injuries are common among children. While I in no way wish to denigrate the seriousness of these injuries, the facts are that they are not really so very common in children. They are certainly far from common when compared with the many road traffic accidents, falls, burns, poisonings, suffocations, and drownings that our children experience daily.

Deaths in children caused by firearms and missiles of any kind are rare. During the years 1969-78 they averaged only 2.8 a year in males and 0.9 in females out of an average of around 1700 deaths a year in children aged 0-14 in England and Wales.¹ Morbidity data are difficult to obtain owing to the lack of a comprehensive national recording system for accidents. Hospital Activity Analysis (HAA) does not usually classify down to details

sufficient to reveal easily those accidents due to firearms. It is only by detailed local studies that the true incidence of such injuries can be ascertained. In one such local study we recorded only one firearm injury in a series of 5152 childhood accidents seen in Warwick Hospital (the main accident and emergency department for a health district of 215 000 population) during 1980.

An 8-year-old boy was accidentally shot in the face by his 15-year-old brother, who was unfamiliar with the safety catch mechanism of a borrowed air pistol. The single pellet entered just below the left eye 5 mm lateral to the nasolacrimal duct. It finally lodged in the right sphenoidal sinus, having presumably traversed the left ethmoid sinus and nasal septum. The eye was undamaged apart from a commotio retinae of the inner lower quadrant. A purulent discharge was noted at the first attempt at simple removal. The pellet was removed at the second attempt after a submucous resection and removal of the anterior wall of the sphenoid. The boy spent 12 days in hospital and has made a full recovery.

The mother of the boy told me that air pistols and rifles are easily obtainable without

licence. There is a flourishing second-hand market among young teenage boys, the ultimate status symbol being to own your own weapon. This mother was frightened to let her dog loose on the local common for fear that it would be shot by trigger-happy youths. One of her cats had already lost an eye from an airgun injury. It appears that these potentially lethal weapons are in regular use by some teenagers, yet remarkably few injuries to humans seem to occur.

In the absence of any overwhelming evidence that this activity causes a great deal of physical harm it is difficult to advocate stricter control. Nevertheless, even a few fatalities and injuries every year are a few too many. In view of the limited success obtained in our efforts to educate children, adolescents, and parents about the hazards of (for example) smoking, drinking, and motorcycle riding it would be a very difficult task to educate them further about the hazards of firearms. In any case, most regular users are very well aware of the hazards. The police admit to having great difficulty in controlling the legal use of airguns.