This is not us
Kate Baddock

On 18 March 2019, the New Zealand Medical Association released a media statement condemning the two horrific terrorist attacks in Christchurch and strongly supporting the Government’s move to immediately tighten gun control in New Zealand.¹

First and foremost, our thoughts are with the Muslim community, their family, friends and whānau. We also pay tribute and owe a debt of gratitude to all the health professionals and other services involved in the immediate aftermath and their ongoing support and healing work that will be needed for individuals and the wider community affected by the tragedy. It was Hippocrates who said wherever the art of medicine is loved, there is also a love of humanity, and it was certainly true for Christchurch on that fateful day of Friday 15 March.

More people than we know have been affected by these heart-breaking events, not least of whom is the tragic loss of Dr Amjad Hamid, who lived in Christchurch with his wife and family and who travelled to Hawera Hospital to work as a rural hospital consultant.

As a nation, we are humbled by the magnitude and outpouring of aroha and support from individuals, organisations and countries around the world. Who would have thought we would be the main item on news channels across the globe? Here in New Zealand it is all anyone is talking about and everyone has an opinion.

Kia kaha—stay strong; aroha—to love, to feel compassion, to feel concern. These are words that resonate, the words of a nation that is grieving, a nation that is in shock and at a loss to fathom how this could have happened in ‘our slice of paradise’. So what next? We cannot let this pass. We need to act—now. The actions we take now will change our future. Our future must not be bound up in what-ifs and maybes, but in a framework that regulates or prevents acts that are driven by hate and the overwhelming effect they have on health, human rights and society.

Time does not always heal, but time is needed to make changes to our current gun laws so that what happened in Christchurch is never repeated. It’s simple—one person should not be able to accumulate lethal weaponry with such ease.

For example, along with the US and Canada we are the only other developed country that registers only the gun owner but not the weapons. The world is watching. We must step up and lead the way in who we are and what we stand for as a nation—there is no better time to review our gun laws and we support the Government’s move to immediately tighten gun control in New Zealand.

In September last year, the Australian Medical Association President Dr Tony Bartone said that “gun deaths have halved in Australia over the past two decades, thanks to the National Firearms Agreement”. He went on to say that “countless lives have been saved, but there is still work to do, and illegal gun possession remains a major health concern”. Guns have a legitimate role in areas such as agriculture, regulated sport, and for the military and police, but gun possession in the broader community is a serious risk to public health. “Doctors see first-hand the damage, and physical and emotional trauma, caused by guns, whether through accidental or intentional misuse, and the AMA strongly opposes any campaigns or policies that seek to dilute or relax the restrictions on firearm purchase and ownership.”² The NZMA echoes the sentiments of the AMA and strongly encourages the New Zealand Government to take account of this in tightening gun control. The lessons are unmistakable: the 1996 Port Arthur massacre which triggered the Australian landmark gun law agreement, and now, Christchurch.
The events of 15 March are bad enough, but we should not lose sight of another critical dynamic—the effect this abhorrent attack is having on the mental and physical health of the people of Christchurch. We are all familiar with the impact of the Christchurch earthquakes that have permeated every aspect of Cantabrian life for the past 7–8 years.

A recent article in the NZMJ highlighted that in Christchurch following the earthquakes there was initial improvement in health followed by a deterioration with subsequent improvement following the heroic/honeymoon/disillusionment/reconstruction model of a response to a disaster.3

This is a timely reminder that Cantabrians will again face a unique set of health stressors, especially in mental health, that will require a range and blend of resources including access to the right services and adequate funding.

We have a duty not to fail; we have an opportunity to lead the way in supporting resilient people who have had the worst thrown at them and still keep on going. Let’s not wait but use this time to be the people we want to be and create the future we want for our children. Speed up the bureaucracy, identify the needs and support the solutions with funding and resources now. Stricter gun controls are vital to our future. Let’s do the right thing, and let’s do it now.

Note: Since the time of writing the editorial, the Government has moved swiftly to tighten the law on gun control.

On 21 March 2019 a group of Ministers signed an order to tighten the law on the sale of assault rifles. The legislation is being drafted, and the Government intends to progress this through the House when Parliament resumes on Tuesday 2 April.

On 25 March 2019 the Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern confirmed that there would be a Royal Commission of Inquiry to look into the causes of the Christchurch terror attack and whether it could have been prevented.

Competing interests:
Nil.

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REFERENCES: