



NEW ZEALAND COLLEGE OF PUBLIC HEALTH MEDICINE

20 March 2019

Rt Hon. Jacinda Ardern
Prime Minister

Via email: j.ardern@ministers.govt.nz

Dear Prime Minister

The New Zealand College of Public Health Medicine (the College) is saddened and concerned by the tragic events in Christchurch last Friday. We would like to add our voice to those calling for immediate reform of New Zealand's gun laws.

The College is the professional body representing the medical specialty of Public Health Medicine in New Zealand. We have 218 members, all of whom are medical doctors, including 185 fully qualified Public Health Medicine Specialists with the majority of the remainder being registrars training in the specialty of public health medicine. Public Health Medicine itself is the branch of medicine concerned with the assessment of population health and health care needs, the development of policy and strategy, health promotion, the control and prevention of disease, and the organisation of services. The College partners to achieve health gain and equity for our population, reducing inequalities across socioeconomic and cultural groups, and promoting environments in which everyone can be healthy.

We note that the last Select Committee Inquiry into issues relating to the possession of firearms in New Zealand did not examine the case of firearms which are lawfully possessed but used for criminal purposes.¹ With hindsight, this omission was unfortunate. Even one act of this nature is way too many.

Although restrictions on the sale of semi-automatic rifles may not have prevented last week's tragedy, the significant loss of life that occurred could have been minimised if the firearms used had not been modified to provide this capability. We note that a ban on semi-automatic assault weapons appears to have contributed to reductions in death rates from gun violence in the United States of America.²

¹ Law and Order Committee Select Committee. Inquiry into issues relating to the illegal possession of firearms in New Zealand: Report of the Law and Order Committee. Wellington: New Zealand House of Representatives, 2017
https://www.parliament.nz/resource/en-NZ/SCR_72851/f06602dd80c8bcc69220182d246269b2427510b9

² America Public Health Association. Support renewal with strengthening of the Federal Assault weapons ban. Washington: APHA. 2003. <https://www.apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policy-statements/policy-database/2014/07/24/17/55/support-renewal-with-strengthening-of-the-federal-assault-weapons-ban>

We believe it is crucial that appropriate restrictions are placed on the ownership and use of firearms to avoid a recurrence of last week's terrible events.

We understand that gun laws are only part of the solution to this issue. There are social, and often economic, antecedents to violence; causes which cannot be dealt with at the level of the individual alone.^{3,4,5} It seems clear that New Zealand is not exempt from the global rise of Islamophobia.⁶ More must be done to address racism, bigotry and hate speech, and for us to gain a society that cares and is kind. We call on the Government, and all political parties, to send a clear message that racism in any form will not be tolerated in our society and that tolerance and compassion matter.

Finally, we note that the effects of gun violence are felt throughout society, impacting significantly on wellbeing. Exposure to violence has been linked to an increase in the risk of other medical illnesses, including asthma, hypertension, cancer and stroke, as well as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.⁵ This will have a significant effect on Christchurch - a city still reeling from previous disaster.

The College stands in support of all affected.

Yours sincerely



Dr Felicity Dumble
President

³ Leeder S. Is Weapons Control a Public Health Issue? Canberra: Australian Medical Association, 2018. <https://ama.com.au/ausmed/weapons-control-public-health-issue>

⁴ Public Health Association of Australia. Submission on Proposed Firearms regulation 2017 and weapons prohibition regulation 2017. Curtin: PHAA. 2017. <https://www.apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policy-statements/policy-database/2019/01/28/violence-is-a-public-health-issue>

⁵ American Public Health Association. Violence is a public health issue: Public Health is essential to understanding and treating violence in the US. Washington: APHA. 2018. <https://www.apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policy-statements/policy-database/2019/01/28/violence-is-a-public-health-issue>

⁶ Science Media Centre. Muslim identity and experiences in New Zealand – Expert Reaction. Wellington: SMC, 19 March 2019. <https://www.sciencemediacentre.co.nz/2019/03/19/muslim-identity-and-experiences-in-new-zealand-expert-reaction/>