

JACOBI IN THE NEWS

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Doctor demands gun control

By SILVINA STERIN PENSEL

As he walks down the hallway, other physicians, residents, students and police officers greet him. There are nurses running from one place to another and the sounds of conversations, of instruments. The floor of some rooms reveal chaos that is still fresh: bloody gauze, tangled cables and syringes. Some patients are watching everything from their gurneys.

Dr. Sheldon Teperman deals with the devastation caused by firearms on a daily basis. Here he is pictured with one of his blood splattered sneakers and one of the bullets that injure and often kill his patients.

“It’s always busy”, says Doctor Sheldon Teperman without stopping. “We move fast in the emergency room because there’s no time to lose. This is where we treat and stabilize those who arrive, and those who are in more serious condition are sent to my department.”



As director of the Jacobi Medical Center Trauma Center in the Bronx, at age 52 Dr. Teperman has seen everything: the woman who was just run over by a car; the man who was beaten with an iron rod until he was disfigured, and the dead and injured left by the chilling accident where a bus overturned, went off the road and was cut in two by a metal post, leaving 15 people dead.

Of the range of atrocities that he sees every day, the most disturbing are the people injured by firearms. “Unfortunately, it’s an everyday occurrence. We see patients injured by firearms all the time. Over there”, he says while pointing to a gurney in the pediatric wing (an area where several stuffed animals try, in vain, to provide some optimism), “I operated on a 16-year-old boy who was shot by the manager of a Burger King while they were arguing. The kid was also armed. He arrived in very bad shape; we opened his chest and he died in my arms.”

Stray bullets, shootings, robberies. Firearms violence is relentless and takes 12,500 lives every year across the country. “I call it the young people's disease”, says the doctor, “because, in general, both the person pulling the trigger and the person shot are between the age of 17 and 27.”

What overwhelms this trauma surgeon, who is equally capable of skillfully operating on a leg, abdomen or neck, is that nothing has been done at the legislative level to slow down or stop this serious problem that many are calling an epidemic.

“Sometimes it’s frustrating. 32 students were shot down at Virginia Tech and nothing was done about it; nor was there any change after the attack in Tucson that left six dead and several wounded, including Congresswoman Gabby Giffords who was shot in the head, and nothing was done after the massacre in the movie theater in Aurora where the attacker shot 71 people and killed 12. We’ll see what happens now in the wake of Sandy Hook”, he says skeptically. “I want to believe that this was an electric shock that woke us up.”

On December 14, Dr. Teperman was glued to the television screen together with some members of his staff. As he watched the number of victims of the Newtown massacre climb, he ran to his office and took a quick look at a photo on one of the walls. The picture, taken in 2004 during a session in a Senate office in the capitol, shows the doctor flanked by Democratic Congresswoman Carolyn McCarthy, a strong proponent of the movement in favor of more gun control, and by Patrick Kennedy, nephew of the assassinated JFK. “We demanded a ban on assault weapons and in the photo you can clearly see the Bushmaster, the same rifle used by the attacker in the elementary school in Connecticut. Had it gone well for us that time, perhaps we wouldn’t be here facing this tragedy.”

In the hospital, he always wears his electric blue uniform and crocs or sneakers with a splatter of blood despite his efforts to remove them. It is also very common to see him in a suit and tie when he goes out to play his role as activist in favor of gun control legislation and attempts to prevent murders and violence.

He is a member of the board of directors of New Yorkers Against Gun Violence and is a familiar face in the stairways at City Hall when different groups meet there to complain about the selling of guns without a license and without background checks. In addition, he is one of the 34; the initiative promoted by Bloomberg and his coalition Mayors Against Illegal Arms in which 34 survivors of firearm attacks and the family members of murder victims demand a plan from Washington to end this problem. “34 people die every day in this country because of firearms. When I met all these people, I was a little nervous because I didn’t know what to tell them in response to the horror of having lost a child, a sister, a father; but when Bloomberg introduced me as an expert in gunshot inflicted trauma and it was my turn to speak, I looked them straight in the eyes and I told them that I would prefer NOT to have to operate almost every day; I would like to gain less experience, be less of an expert. I wish that your loved ones were still alive and that is why I’m here demanding a plan, demanding a change.”