

# Making a Difference

Killing 35,000 Americans a year, firearms rank second only to car accidents as the country's leading cause of death. What to do about such an unsettling fact? Physician Garen Wintemute thinks he has an answer: tackling gun violence not as a criminal justice issue but as a public health problem. That means doctors need to spread the word on the evils of junk guns—even if they have to step on some powerful toes.

## The Doctor Who Wields Numbers to Combat Gun Violence

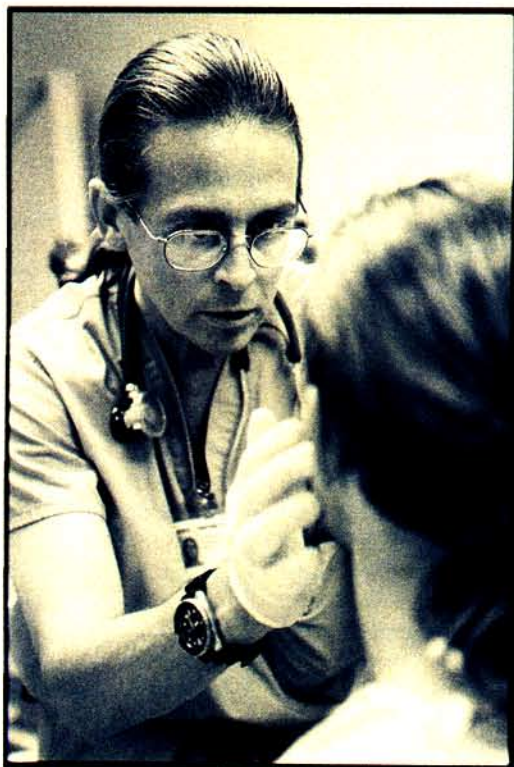
**E**mergency room physician Garen Wintemute had seen his share of gunshot wounds, both in an 18-month job at a small California hospital and in a six-month stint at a combat zone in Cambodia. But it wasn't until 1982, when he took a break from treating trauma victims to earn a master's degree in public health from Johns Hopkins University, that something clicked for the ponytailed physician. It occurred during a rousing lecture by a former trial attorney who challenged members of the audience to get outside the ivory tower and use their knowledge for the public good. Recalls Wintemute, "I basically fell in love with what he was selling."

The question was, What to do? Drawing on his intimate knowledge of the harm wreaked by guns, Wintemute decided to devote himself to stanching the epidemic of bloodshed in the United States.

What sets him apart from his colleagues in emergency medicine is his approach, one he likes to call guerrilla science. As director of the Violence Prevention Research Program in Sacramento, California, an affiliate of the University of California at Davis, Wintemute seeks to broaden the debate over guns—long seen as simply a criminal justice concern—by framing the problem in terms of public health. Although the 45-year-old doctor still works a shift or two a week in the UC Davis medical center's emergency room, he seizes every opportunity to drive home the enormous cost exacted by firearm injuries.

"Medicine is about seeing trees, while public health is about seeing the forest," he says. "The ER puts a human face to all this number crunching we do."

It's fair to say Wintemute is a tad obsessed with guns. In addition to testifying before Congress and state legislatures, he has published dozens of medical-journal articles on firearm hazards. In *Ring of Fire*, a book-length report published by his organization, he lambastes Southern California companies



that mass-produce easily concealed, inexpensive handguns known as junk guns or Saturday night specials. Noting that these pistols are three times more likely than any other handgun to be involved in a criminal investigation, he has called for an outright ban.

Wintemute admits to borrowing liberally from a model that consumer crusader Ralph Nader and antitobacco gadfly Stan Glantz have used successfully: targeting manufacturers that profit from harmful products. Despite his strong stand, Wintemute isn't a zealot. The former family physician has owned guns; during college he even taught rifle range shooting as a camp counselor. But, he says, the special shield laws that protect gun makers from being sued should not exist. "Individuals need to bring lawsuits against gun manufacturers in the same way consumers have filed suit against the cigarette companies," he says.

"Both products, when used as intended, kill people."

Although Wintemute has spent the last 15 years working on injury prevention, his program was only established formally in 1993. Currently he and a small core of staff researchers are compiling a series of reports detailing which kinds of gun owners are likely to commit violent crimes. "Most people with criminal records can still legally buy guns under federal law," he says. "So we asked the obvious question: Are these people more of a risk than those who have no criminal record? And we're finding that—no surprise—bad guys continue to be bad guys and, in some cases, very bad guys indeed." His goal? To convince the public—and legislators—that some people should not own guns, period.

Wintemute is a workaholic who's decided not to have children in order to devote himself to his crusade full-time. "I'm in guns for the long haul," he says. "There's something about unconditional giving that makes me get up in the morning."

—Sarah Henry