

What to Do When Your Doctor Asks About Your Guns

Health care professionals misusing their patients' trust to push a political agenda of gun control is called an ethical *boundary violation*.

You may encounter the question in your health plan's standard health appraisal questionnaire. Even though it may not be of your doctor's making (your doctor may very likely just be going along with the guidelines of his or her gun-hating medical organization such as the AAP or ACP), it's still part of your permanent medical record. Or your doctor may have a personal prejudice against gun ownership, shaped by her training in medical school or residency. Either way, it is important for people to know some very important facts:

- Doctors receive absolutely no training about firearm safety, mechanics, or tactics in medical school or residency. They are completely unqualified by their training to advise anyone about guns.
- Gun ownership is a civil right. A doctor's abuse of his position of trust to pressure you to give up that civil right is professionally and morally wrong. In some states it is illegal. You DO NOT have to tolerate it.
- You as a consumer have great power in the doctor-patient relationship. Do not be afraid to use it.

This does not include cases where a doctor casually talks with you about guns out of a common interest you both may have.

So what can you do when your doctor or your health plan starts asking you about guns in your home?

A range of options is available to you, some sending a more powerful message than others.

- 1) Politely refuse to answer the doctor's question or the health plan's questionnaire item about guns. You can either explain your discomfort with the question or decline to give a reason.
- 2) If the gun question(s) appears on your health plan's routine health assessment questionnaire, file a formal written complaint with the health plan. Every health plan has a member complaint process, often prescribed by law. Your complaint will be registered and the health plan will respond.
- 3) If the health plan responds with the excuse that their questions about your guns are standard medical practice that they must follow, you can take the complaint to the next step—file a written complaint with your state agency that regulates health plans. In California you would follow the complaint procedure on the Department of Managed Health Care website (dmhc.ca.gov/fileacomplaint.aspx). It's your right as a patient.

- 4) If your doctor persists in asking intrusive questions about guns in your home, you can also file a complaint specifically against him or her with your health plan. Such complaints are taken seriously, and the doctor will be called to account for it. Having one or more complaints about ethical boundary violations on her record will make her think twice about doing it again.
- 5) Internet consumer rating sites have created another way doctors can be publicly rated on the basis of service, attitude, and behavior. Some commonly used rating sites are Yelp.com, Healthgrades.com, Vitals.com, and RateMDs.
- 6) Increasingly, doctors' pay from Medicare and insurance companies is tied to how they score on patient satisfaction surveys. These are often sent randomly to patients, but you can request one to fill out. You can have a powerful impact on a doctor's conduct by reporting the doctor's unethical questioning about your guns.
- 7) If the doctor's conduct is especially offensive, you have the right to submit a complaint to the doctor's licensing board. This is an agency in your state government that holds the ultimate power of licensure over your doctor. A quick internet search for "medical board" in your state should take you to the official form for filing a complaint. This is a step that should not be taken lightly.

Remember when writing your complaint to be polite. Explain why you find the doctor's or health plan's behavior unacceptable. Include the powerful points we've discussed:

- Your doctor is professionally unqualified to give expert advice on firearms
- Your right to own firearms is a civil right that is none of your doctor's business
- A doctor misusing his or her authority and trust to push a political agenda of gun control is an ethical *boundary violation*. Such unprofessional conduct is not acceptable.

Your right to own a firearm is enshrined in the Constitution. Don't let any doctor or health plan intimidate you into giving up your civil rights.