Children and Teens in Emergency Departments Who Are at Risk for Suicide: Nearly 20% Have Access to Guns

Stephen Teach, MD, presents research findings at the Pediatric Academic Societies.

Washington, DC (PRWEB) May 07, 2013 -- Nearly one in five children and teens found to be at risk for suicide by emergency department care teams report that there are guns in their homes. This is according to a study presented yesterday by Stephen Teach, MD, MPH, FAAP, at the Pediatric Academic Societies (PAS) annual meeting in Washington, DC. Dr. Teach is the Associate Chief of Emergency Medicine at Children's National Medical Center.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data, suicide is the second leading cause of death among young people ages 10 to 24 years in the United States. Nearly half of youths who die by suicide use a firearm.

Dr. Teach was part of a team of emergency room physician/researchers who created a suicide risk screening tool for healthcare professionals in emergency departments (EDs) to figure out which youths need further mental health evaluation to keep them from harming themselves. As part of the research to develop that tool, researchers asked youths about access to guns in or around their home and about gun/bullet storage.

“For more than 1.5 million adolescents, the ED is their primary point of contact with the healthcare system, which makes the ED an important place for identifying youth at risk for suicide,” said Dr. Teach.

Of the patients who completed the emergency department screening tool in this study, almost 30 percent were found to be at risk for suicide, and almost 20 percent of those at risk, reported guns in or around the home. Of those at risk for suicide and reporting guns in the home, 31 percent knew how to access the guns, 31 percent knew how to access the bullets, and 15 percent knew how to access both the guns and the bullets.

Many clinicians and parents do not know how to ask youth about suicide, so they require screening tools to assist in detection, said study senior author Lisa M. Horowitz, PhD, MPH, Staff Scientist/Pediatric Psychologist at the National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health. “According to our data, when asked their opinion, nearly all of the kids in our study were in favor of suicide screening in the ED. Our study shows that if you ask kids directly about suicide, they will tell you what they are thinking.”

Study participants included 524 patients ages 10 to 21 who were seen for medical, surgical, or psychiatric complaints at one of three pediatric EDs. They were asked to fill out a 17-item questionnaire that the researchers used to develop ASQ (Ask Suicide-Screening Questions), a four-question screening tool that can be used for all pediatric patients visiting the ED. The ASQ has been validated against a longer more in-depth suicide assessment tool.

“While many youths who kill themselves have mental health disorders, up to 40 percent of youths who kill themselves have no known mental illness,” said co-author and youth suicide expert, Jeffrey A. Bridge, PhD,
Principal Investigator at The Research Institute at Nationwide Children’s Hospital and Associate Professor of Pediatrics at The Ohio State University. “Therefore, it is important to screen all children and adolescents for suicide, regardless of the reason they are visiting the ED. This study also highlights the importance of parents understanding the risks of having guns in their homes. Being at risk for suicide and having access to firearms is a volatile mix. These conversations need to take place in the ED with families of children at risk for suicide.”

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The Pediatric Academic Societies (PAS) are four individual pediatric organizations that co-sponsor the PAS Annual Meeting – the American Pediatric Society, the Society for Pediatric Research, the Academic Pediatric Association, and the American Academy of Pediatrics. Members of these organizations are pediatricians and other health care providers who are practicing in the research, academic and clinical arenas. The four sponsoring organizations are leaders in the advancement of pediatric research and child advocacy within pediatrics, and all share a common mission of fostering the health and well-being of children worldwide.

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