

MEDCHI, THE MARYLAND STATE MEDICAL SOCIETY  
HOUSE OF DELEGATES

Resolution 4-21

INTRODUCED BY: Medical Student Section  
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SUBJECT: Re-evaluating “Nonlethal” Weapons Use in the Setting of  
Unarmed Crowds

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Whereas, nonlethal or less-lethal weapons (which include but not limited to rubber bullets, kinetic impact projectiles, and riot control agents such as tear gas, etc.) pose a public health risk to individuals exercising their freedoms of assembly; and

Whereas, a 2017 systematic review of kinetic impact projectiles for crowd-control examined data over nearly 30 years and found that 1) kinetic impact projectiles, often called rubber or plastic bullets, cause significant morbidity and mortality due to penetrative injuries and trauma to the head, neck, and torso, 2) injuries could lead to death and permanent disabilities, and 3) 71% of those injured had severe injuries, most commonly to the skin and extremities; <sup>1</sup> and

Whereas, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has determined that riot control agents, commonly referred to as “tear gas” can lead to long-term health consequences such as eye scarring, glaucoma, cataracts, and asthma with prolonged exposure, especially in an enclosed area. Prolonged exposure or exposure to a large dose of riot control agent can also cause death via respiratory failure and/or severe chemical burns to the throat and lungs; <sup>2</sup> and

Whereas, during the increase in protests in 2020, there were reports of many protesters, some even as young as 16, suffering severe injuries and disabilities due to nonlethal weapons. In one case, a 16-year old was a bystander watching a peaceful protest, and his forehead was hit with a beanbag round, resulting in a seven-hour surgery and damage to his prefrontal cortex. This demonstrates the dangers that nonlethal weapons pose to not only protestors but also non-participating bystanders; <sup>3</sup> and

Whereas, the American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO) has reported patients between the ages of 21-37 losing eyes and patients between 16-59 suffering eye injuries due to nonlethal weapons that include rubber bullet or similar projectiles and a tear gas canister; <sup>4</sup> and

Whereas, the name “nonlethal” or “less-lethal” is misleading and may cause the public to underestimate the risk associated with these weapons when deciding to engage in protests or demonstration; and

Whereas, despite a spike in demonstration events during the summer of 2020, the independent and nonpartisan nonprofit Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project determined nearly 95% of over 10,600 demonstration events were peaceful (i.e. not involving destructive or disruptive

behavior such as violence, vandalism, and looting);<sup>5,6</sup> and

Whereas, the number of mass protests is increasing. From 2009-2019, the number of mass protests increased on average by 11.5% across all regions of the world, according to the bipartisan, nonprofit Center for Strategic and International Studies;<sup>7</sup> and

Whereas, nonlethal weapons are not well regulated. Kaiser Health News and USA TODAY discovered police officers violated their own rules when utilizing less-lethal weapons by firing them indiscriminately at peaceful protesters, when they should have only been used against dangerous individuals;<sup>8,9</sup> and

Whereas, in fact, the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials has not been clarified and implemented with detailed guidelines that are accepted worldwide;<sup>10</sup> and

Whereas, states such and municipalities have already begun restricting the use of nonlethal weapons at protests.<sup>11</sup> Massachusetts, Washington DC, Colorado, and Virginia prohibit or restrict the use of kinetic energy projectiles at protests. Massachusetts, Washington DC, Oregon, Colorado, and Virginia with many major cities nationwide such as Seattle, New Orleans, Iowa City, Charlotte, Columbus, and Springfield have enacted policies that prohibit or restricting chemical irritant use at protests. Furthermore, in 2020 the Austin Police Department discontinued using bean bag rounds for crowd dispersal after protestors were injured by these projectiles;<sup>12</sup> and

Whereas, recently, protestors rallying for racial equality were more likely identified to be younger and nonwhite, according to the Pew Research Center.<sup>13</sup> Minorities already experience health disparities,<sup>14</sup> and long-term health consequences can have a greater effect on younger individuals; and

Whereas, the AAO advocates against rubber bullet and other kinetic-impact projectiles. Prominent organizations that support this initiative include the American Academy of Allergy, the Asthma and Immunology, the American Academy of Family Physicians, the American Geriatrics Society, the American Society of Nephrology, and the Council of Medical Specialty Societies;<sup>4</sup> and

Whereas, a search of the AMA's Policy Finder on the topics of "nonlethal weapons," "protest," and "assembly" generated no existing AMA policies applicable to this resolution; therefore be it

Resolved, that it be MedChi Policy that individuals should be able to safely exercise their freedom of speech and assembly without having to worry about their health being jeopardized, especially when exercising these rights peacefully; and be it further

Resolved, that MedChi asks the AMA to 1) conduct a thorough review of and advocate for increased regulation of nonlethal weapons; 2) discourage the use of nonlethal weapons against individuals participating in and bystanders around peaceful demonstrations. 3) encourage the development of innovative tools police departments can use in large crowds that protect the health of police forces and the public without resulting in injury, disability, or death.

Fiscal Note: Included in existing AMA Delegation budget.

## REFERENCES

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