

Screen dementia patients for gun safety: experts

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Doctors should screen all dementia patients, particularly those in rural areas, for their capacity to own and use a gun safely, Australian academics say.

The group of dementia experts writing in the Medical Journal of Australia this week said that although firearm ownership is uncommon in Australia the [risk of harm, injury and violence](#) meant firearm risk assessment should be routine.

The cognitive decline seen in dementia alongside other symptoms such as psychosis, depression and aggression were major risk factors for firearm misuse, according to the experts.

“Dementia is often undetected in the community but even when known, family members may not appreciate safety concerns and remove guns from the household of adults deemed incompetent to use them,” they wrote.

“In dementia, a variety of cognitive impairments may increase the risk of unsafe firearm use, including apraxia (loss of the ability to manipulate objects), visuospatial and memory deficits, and executive dysfunction (including impulsivity, disinhibition and impaired judgement).”

At present doctors are only obligated to report concerns they have about the risk of harm from patients with access to firearms to state or territory police, but there are no guidelines regarding mandatory screening.

The onus is on the individual firearm licence holder to declare any relevant medical conditions.

However the authors propose that doctors use a “combined capacity and risk assessment model” on all their dementia patients.

Assessments should include tests for relevant personality, physical or cognitive factors, and symptoms of mental illness or behavioural symptoms with and assessment of capacity to own and use firearms.

They would take up to an hour to complete, depending on how well the doctor knew the patient, and would need to be reviewed regularly.

Such assessments should be introduced instead of a blanket ban on gun ownership based on age, dementia or mental illness, the authors said.

“If, as is the case with driving licenses, restrictions are arbitrarily made on the basis of age, discrimination against older people may occur. Similarly, excluding anyone with a mental illness or dementia from gun ownership is unjust and unsupported by the evidence,” they concluded.

Under current laws, GPs are protected in general terms from any liability if they report a patient who possesses a firearm as unsafe or poses a threat to public safety, according Dr Sara Bird, MDA National’s medicolegal and advisory services manager.

“In practical terms, these legal obligations in relation to firearms are similar to one of the exceptions to privacy under the Privacy Act where GPs are permitted to disclose information about a patient to a third party where the patient poses a serious threat to the life, health or safety of any individual,” she said.

A seven-point model developed by the authors covers tests for relevant personality, physical or cognitive factors, and symptoms of mental illness or behavioural symptoms with and assessment of capacity to own and use firearms

Medical Journal of Australia [2014; online.](#)