

## Analysis

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## The clash with NRA proves therapeutic for trauma doctors

A recent clash with the National Rifle Association (NRA) has shown some doctors who treat gunshot victims a way to heal their own trauma: through activism against gun violence. With rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) on par with that of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans, trauma surgeons have found that speaking out helps them cope with the hopelessness and anger that come from seeing gunshot victims repeatedly wheeled into the trauma bay.

"Working in advocacy is a way to deal with burnout," said Dr Jessica Beard, a trauma surgeon at Temple University Hospital in Philadelphia. The doctors' clash with the NRA began in November after the American College of Physicians published a paper about reducing firearm injuries and deaths in the United States. The NRA answered with a tweet admonishing "self-important anti-gun doctors to stay in their lane."

That set off a viral response. Trauma surgeons around the country posted pictures of their blood-soaked scrubs and operating rooms after treating gunshot victims, punctuated with a defiant #ThisIsOurLane hashtag. The movement has spread. In Pennsylvania, a group of doctors formed a coalition to urge policy changes to state legislators. North of the border, the Canadian Doctors for Protection from Guns staged demonstrations in April, shortly after forming.

Experts have likened the doctors' uproar to that of high school students from Parkland, Florida, who led nationwide protests after surviving a mass shooting that killed 17 people on campus in February 2018. "What you saw in the postings from #ThisIsOurLane directly showed the impact of gun violence on trauma surgeons. That was our way to demonstrate the trauma that we experience in dealing with the victims of gun violence," Beard said. For many it was a call to action, to work scientifically or politically to fight gun violence.

Beard chose research, treating gun violence as a public health issue to reduce death and suffering. Her study published in April found Philadelphia's three trauma hospitals receive the equivalent of a mass shooting every 2-1/2 months, when defined as four or more gunshot victims arriving in clusters. Other doctors are more overtly political. The American College of Physicians supported measures including "appropriate regulation of the purchase of legal firearms," such as requiring background checks for gun buyers and greater checks on domestic abusers.

Dr Zoe Maher, another Temple trauma surgeon, helped form the Coalition of Trauma Centers for Firearm Injury Prevention, which urges changes in public policy to Pennsylvania state legislators. The coalition's first campaign was to support a "red flag" bill that would enable authorities to take away guns from people legally deemed dangerous. Maher said she was motivated because so many of the nearly 40,000 US gun deaths each year were preventable.

"The empowerment that I am gaining as an individual in trying to actually combat this preventable public health crisis is something that definitely helps to protect me from burnout," Maher said. The NRA has opposed research that it says is intended to restrict the right to keep and bear arms as guaranteed by the Second Amendment of the US Constitution. It did not respond to requests for comment for this article.

### Moral injury

Medicine has long been affected by burnout, or what some doctors prefer to call "moral injury." This is defined by feelings of being disconnected from oneself, emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment. Other afflictions include vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue, which can affect any medical professional exposed to trauma, including nurses, other operating room personnel and first responders.

Some 40 percent of trauma surgeons showed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and 15 percent met the criteria for a PTSD diagnosis, according to a 2014 survey by the Journal of Trauma and Acute Care Surgery. A similar 15.7 percent of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans screen positive for PTSD, according to the US Department of Veterans Affairs.

Medical journals report that some 400 physicians of all types die by suicide each year, the equivalent of an entire medical school class. While soldiers, journalists and other medical professionals have dealt more openly in recent years with the mental health effects of witnessing horrible events, trauma surgeons have lagged behind. "They're going to be one of the last people to say, 'I can't handle this, I'm in emotional distress,'" said Nancy Beckerman, professor at Yeshiva University's Wurzelweil School of Social Work in New York. Dr Stephanie Bonne, an activist and trauma surgeon at Rutgers University Hospital in Newark, New Jersey, said trauma in the operating room adds to other daily stresses such as seeing the latest shootings on the news while the pager sounds, indicating another gunshot victim is arriving. — Reuters

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Supporters of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) take part in a silent protest rally in New Delhi yesterday, following clashes between BJP supporters and the opposition Trinamool Congress (TMC) in Kolkata. — AFP

## Message undelivered: Weak election campaign hurts India Congress Party

In January, India's main opposition Congress party seemed poised for a strong fight back against Prime Minister Narendra Modi after victories in three heartland states late last year. But just over four months later, even Congress officials admit the attempt to unseat Modi in the ongoing general election has suffered from a weak campaign and fumbled communications. Political strategists say the mis-steps and an inability to sew up alliances with other opposition groups had hurt Congress.

Votes are to be counted on May 23 and it's still not clear if Modi will come back to power, although many political analysts and pollsters have said he has the edge. Two Congress officials told Reuters that their campaign, centered around a promise of a handout of 72,000 rupees (\$1,022) every year for India's poorest families, was rolled out late - only four days before the first phase of the polls began on April 11.

In contrast, the Modi campaign's communications have been a huge strength - no one can complain that the message didn't get out. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has dominated newspaper frontpages, TV screens, social media posts, roadside billboards and rallies through the election, backed by a war chest multiple times that controlled by Congress. On 11 Hindi TV news channels, for example, Modi has got nearly three times the air-time compared to Congress party chief Rahul Gandhi between March 30-April 26, according to Broadcast Audience Research Council India.

Congress has also been unable to forge alliances with other opposition parties in two important states and adequately overhaul its grassroots organization, political strategists said, making an already difficult contest even harder. The campaign slip-up was partly because the party's detailed manifesto came out late, followed by further delays in readying promotional materials, the two Congress officials said. Both requested anonymity because they were not authorised to speak to the media.

"The backroom work to push out the campaign hadn't been done," one of them said. "Basically, it was a big royal mess." A Congress candidate in eastern India said that his party's publicity campaign wasn't even noticed by rank-and-file workers, let alone voters. On multiple trips to northern Uttar Pradesh, which elects more lawmakers than any other state, Reuters found that many voters did not know about Congress's handout promise.

### Difficult to predict

Elections in India are notoriously difficult to predict, and growing farm distress and a lack of jobs could still hurt the BJP, like it did last December when Congress wrested away three states from the ruling party. There are a whole series of regional and caste-based parties that could benefit from any such anti-Modi swing as much as Congress. If that happens, a coalition of parties might form the next government with Congress a powerful force in that though not necessarily calling all the shots.

A key problem in the campaign has been that instead of maximizing the impact of December's wins, Congress stumbled, particularly after a suicide bombing in Kashmir's Pulwama region, where a Pakistan-based militant group killed 40 Indian policemen in February, the second Congress official said. "After the state elections there was complacency, and after Pulwama happened, there was no coherent campaign to respond," he said. In response to Pulwama, Modi sent Indian warplanes into Pakistan in late February, dramatically escalating tensions with the nuclear-armed neighbor while projecting himself as a fearless leader, which the BJP deftly used to craft an election campaign focused on national security.

### Huge losses

P Chidambaram, a top Congress strategist and a former finance minister, acknowledged that Modi had dominated the election so far, but declined to comment on his party's delayed publicity campaign. "I think if anybody has gained in this election campaign it is Mr Gandhi, if anybody has lost ground in the election campaign it is Mr Modi," he told Reuters. "I think BJP will suffer huge losses." Part of Congress's confidence stems from states like western Rajasthan, where it has set up good ground operations. On May 6, as India voted in the fifth phase of the election, over 100 young men and women employed by a private firm sat inside a basement in Rajasthan's capital city of Jaipur making and receiving calls on behalf of Congress. — Reuters



Valentino Dixon (right) attends a screening for inmates in a prison in Washington, DC during a visit. Dixon, who spent 28 years behind bars for a crime he didn't commit, was exonerated in September 2018. — AFP

## Dixon, wrongfully convicted of killing a man, then saved by golf

Convicted for a crime he did not commit, Valentino Dixon spent 28 years behind bars. Then, less than a year after his release, he has returned to prison to tell inmates how golf saved his life. "I played twice (and) I am no good at it," said the 49-year-old during a visit to a penitentiary in Washington. Yet it was this sport that ultimately got him out of jail and which now allows him to lobby for reform in the US penal system before unexpected audiences.

Dixon, who grew up in a rough neighborhood of Buffalo in the northeastern United States, had never before set foot on a green when his life was upended one night in August 1991. That was when a fight broke out in front of a restaurant and shots were fired, leaving a man dead. Two days later, on the basis of an anonymous tip-off, police arrested Dixon, who was at the time the young father of a six-month-old baby girl.

Another man later told reporters that he was the one who actually pulled the trigger that night, but the authorities refused to speak to him. "Eight witnesses cleared me of the crime. When I went to trial, my lawyer did not call any of those witnesses. So, I was convicted and given a 39-year sentence," Dixon told AFP. For the first seven years in prison Dixon said he was simply bored, but then he began "drawing my butt off." He spent up to 10 hours per-day drawing,

refining his technique and impressing those around him.

### No gunpowder

After being shown a photo by a prison guard, Dixon drew a picture of the 12th hole of the famous Augusta golf course in Georgia. That launched him on a journey to draw other clubs, and even to invent his own. One day, he wrote to a journalist penning a column called "Golf Saved Me" in the magazine Golf Digest. Recognizing his talent, the reporter did some research on Dixon and penned a long article about him. That article garnered attention at Georgetown University in Washington, which had a study program dedicated to clearing people who had been wrongly convicted. Three students started investigating Dixon's case and finally produced a documentary about him.

In front of their camera, the prosecutor in charge of the case admitted having sought traces of gunpowder on the suspect's clothes in 1991 and finding nothing, a vital piece of information he had always kept to himself. "Twenty-seven years later, without doing it on purpose, he confessed," Marc Howard, the professor in charge of the program at Georgetown, said of the prosecutor. "Valentino's lawyer was able to use that to get him out of jail." On September 19, 2018, Dixon, now in his late forties, walked out of prison a free man. — AFP

## Altcoins: Rise of smaller rivals throws up fresh challenge to bitcoin

Bitcoin's weathered hacks, heists, booms and busts to reign as the king of cryptocurrencies through its first decade. But now there's a fresh challenge to its dominance of the fledgling market: some 2,000 smaller digital coins. Collectively, "altcoins" are gaining ground on their bigger cousin. Individually, they are gaining traction among users, gathering communities of developers and users often deeply devoted to their goals.

Bitcoin now accounts for around 60% of the \$240 billion crypto market, down from nearly 90% just over two years ago. That fading dominance reflects tough times for the original cryptocurrency since its late 2017 apex. Bitcoin has almost doubled in value this year, rallying nearly 30% in recent days to touch its highest level in ten months on Tuesday.

But last year it lost three-quarters of its value. That volatility has put off mainstream investors from pension funds to asset managers who are seen as crucial to bitcoin's growth from speculative token to established asset. Bitcoin has also struggled for traction as means of payment, its intended usage. Few but cryptocurrency diehards go shopping with the digital currency. Enter the altcoins.

Binance Coin and Bitcoin Cash, Tether, Monero and Dash: The diversity of their names reflects myriad protocols and groups of users, traders and developers behind them. They also suffer from high volatility and few are used for mainstream payments. But playing out in their growth is a slow-burn tussle that analysts and academics describe as a race to find the answers to bitcoin's flaws. It's one that could shape the evolution of cryptocurrencies and related technologies like blockchain.

### Money of the internet?

The two biggest altcoins, Ethereum and XRP, together account for about a fifth of the coin market, with respective circulations of \$22 billion and \$17 billion. Others, with names like AnarchistCoin and CryptoPing, are illiquid and seldom used. "Their proliferation is driven by the need to spark new innovation - security innova-

tions, or a new algorithm that allows faster transaction to a new blockchain," said Paolo Tasca, who runs University College London's Centre for Blockchain Technologies.

The emergence of a de facto "money of the internet" - a digital coin that is recognized and accepted online - is widely seen as a prerequisite for cryptocurrencies to break through into the mainstream. Bitcoin, seen as the most likely to take that mantle, has mostly failed to live up to its billing. Without doubt, it's the most well-known of its kind. And to the extent they do look at cryptocurrencies, larger investors tend to gravitate towards bitcoin.

But its use in commerce is hamstrung by high transaction costs and low speed. And for all its proponents' claims that it is "digital gold," bitcoin's volatility means that it is highly impractical as a store of value. "Bitcoin was designed to be the money of the internet, but that was a very early idea," said Hugo Volz Oliveira, an analyst at trading platform London Block Exchange. "Other projects have tried to fill the gap that exists."

Some, like ethereum, power blockchain-based applications. Others, known as "stablecoins," look to overcome the problems associated with wild price fluctuations by being pegged to fiat currency. A bigger proportion still are essentially clones of bitcoin, offering little in the way of radically difficult uses. Some, such as Litecoin, are designed to tackle some of bitcoin's weaknesses, such as slow transactions.

Bitcoin proponents point to initiatives such as the Lightning network - code that can be added to the blockchain that's designed to make payments faster and cheaper - that could help it overcome its structural flaws. And even as altcoins spread, high-profile supporters such as Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey see bitcoin maintaining its dominance. In an podcast released in February, Dorsey said bitcoin will become the internet's native currency, given that it was born, developed and tested online. Altcoins outperformed bitcoin by four percent in the first quarter of this year, according to Cumberland, a major cryptocurrency trader based in Chicago. — Reuters