Thanks very much John. I’m a relative newcomer to journals and editing. I’m speaking really as a practising clinician, full time NHS in the UK. For people who are working full time within a service, what is absolutely necessary is a group of journals and publications that inform us of topics of interest, often different from our fields of specialization, and to provide a critical way of getting involved. So I would very much echo the views here about the need to write and to publish and engage in debate by way of medical journals.

The medical press offers an important forum to present data and debate. There are different types of publication, some prestigious journals with very rigorous criteria, others more open to discussion and opinion. Medicine Conflict and Survival is a specialist journal that offers opportunities to publish on very specialist topics, unlikely to be accepted by the more generalist journals; it also offers opportunities to debate and present more speculative issues and can be a useful precursor for publication in the mainstream journals.

Data must always be robust, but there is often a tendency to focus only upon the measurable, whereas often the critical issue would be to report what is significant. In my psychiatric work we have a lot of discussion in the academic journals – should the only thing that should be published be randomized control trials? There are certain views within the medical press that that’s the only valid form of data. I fiercely resist this. One must find always when looking at data and case reports simple things that convey information of importance.

Psychological issues tend to be less robust than the physical. Issues pertaining to arms would include ideas of motivation. What is the motivation to kill? From the person who pulls the trigger to the person who orders it, to the person who manufactures the weapon in the first place. There’s a whole range of issues around motivation that need to be explored.

There’s the idea of amassing weapons. I think many of us will be struck by the similarities between those individuals who want a gun but not just one gun, who indeed want many guns, and the states that want a nuclear weapon but not just one, who want many nuclear weapons. So what are the motivations behind these things? The psycho-social consequences of small arms are difficult to quantify and describe, and move the subject into less hard data. Medical journals have an important role in witnessing the psycho-social consequences in those areas in the world that are most troubled, where most of the violence takes place. The need for journals to take articles from these areas, and perhaps not be too draconian about the absolute correctness of
the data. I think what is essential is not so much the perfection of the data, but the validity of the conclusions that one draws from it. So if the data is not perfect, one should acknowledge that and find conclusions appropriately.

Medical journals must consider what levels of evidence are available and possible in the field of small arms. Surveys, case reports, descriptions are all valid forms of evidence. Qualitative data and research is important in this field as well as quantitative data. This is particularly so with regard to the psychological and psychosocial consequences of small arms violence.

Understanding the causes of violence and taking a preventative approach requires development of theory and fits well into the “education and debate” sections of journals. There is also an important role for personal views exploring issues and linkages between different aspects. The multidisciplinary approach is also of great importance.

The critical issue is that any inferences and conclusions must be valid and supported by the available data. Opinion and the development of theory has a role, as long as it is defined as such and suggests further research to clarify the issues.