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TASER™: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is a Taser?

The Taser is a device that emits electricity via two wires and barbs that strike a person that a police officer needs to subdue. It is a conducted energy device (CED) classified by police and the military as a 'less than lethal' device. It has been in use for more than 27 years in the USA. Around the world some 11,500 law enforcement agencies use around 260,000 CEDs.

When do police use the Taser?

Police may use a Taser when a person is an imminent threat to a police officer or member of the public, but when use of a firearm is not warranted. It gives officers another option along with the baton or capsicum spray and the firearm for controlling dangerous and violent suspects. It is generally classed on the same level as capsicum spray on the force continuum.

How risky is use of the Taser?

One of the most objective and authoritative studies carried out by the UK Defence Scientific Advisory Council Sub-committee on the Medical Implications of Less-Lethal Weapons 'concludes that the risk of life-threatening or serious injuries from the M26 (or the later X26) Taser is very low'¹. The assessment of medical risks was undertaken by the UK Defence Science and Technology Laboratory.

A very recent report by the US Department of Justice, *Study of Deaths Following Electro Muscular Disruption: Interim Report*, June 2008², found that 'although

¹ UK Police Scientific Development Branch *Further Evaluation of Taser Devices*, David I Wilkinson, Publication No 19/05. (PSDB 19/05)

² www.ojp.usdoj.gov

exposure to CED is not risk free, there is no conclusive medical evidence within the state of current research that indicates a high risk of serious injury or death from the direct effects of CED exposure'. It also found that the risk may be greater with continuous or repeated discharge of the Taser, and for at-risk individuals such as small children, the elderly, those with heart disease or pregnant women.

What effect does it have on the person?

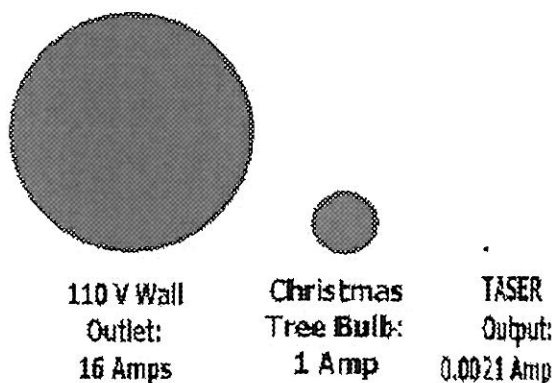
The Taser's electrical current affects the human central nervous system resulting in neuro-muscular incapacitation or uncontrollable muscle contraction and pain, so that the person is subdued or immobilised and falls to the ground, generally without causing serious harm or death. As a result, it is effective on people affected by alcohol, drugs, rage or in an unstable mental state.

The 'most intense effects of the Taser only last for the duration that the electricity is applied'³, but the subject may then have aching or tingly muscles and feel dazed, confused or lethargic.

What level of electricity is delivered by the Taser?

It is important to note that volts do not kill; it is 1 to 2 amps that can kill. The Taser delivers 0.0021 amps to the body. In comparison, a defibrillator in an ambulance delivers an electrical charge several hundred times stronger.

TASER: Low Current



Current Comparison⁴

³ Ibid, pp 57.

⁴ Source: *Safety of TASER Electronic Control Device*, Appendix 1, An Introduction to Taser, pp 11, December 4 2007.

What kinds of injury to the person Tasered can result?

The person may be injured from the resulting fall or, in a small number of cases, the barb from the Taser may cause injury and need to be removed by a GP or in hospital. The risk of serious head injury from the fall is considered to be low⁵.

Does the Taser affect heart function?

In healthy volunteers, no change in cardiac function has been shown and in intoxicated persons, no significant difference in cardiac function has been observed.⁶ Similarly, in physically exhausted adults no effect on cardiac function has been established.

Pacemakers and implantable cardiac defibrillators are not affected by the Taser.

Can injuries be averted by use of the Taser?

Compared with injuries when police firearms are used, and when capsicum spray, batons or police dogs are used, injury rates for police officers and the person being subdued are significantly lower which is why police forces are making Tasers more widely available to front-line police officers. Use of Taser CEDs helps reduce the risk of incidents escalating to lethal force levels.

Has anyone been killed by a Taser?

Amnesty International⁷ claims that around 150 people have died after contact with a Taser. This does not mean that the Taser was the actual cause of death.

The UN Committee Against Torture is claimed to have said that use of the Taser amounts to torture. In fact the Committee called on the United States to deploy Tasers only as a non-lethal alternative to using firearms.⁸

Analysis of autopsy reports by medical researchers⁹ found high levels of illegal substance use (78%), (particularly use of stimulants like cocaine or methamphetamine (86%)), cardio-vascular disease (54%), and excited delirium (75%) in those who died after the application of a Taser.

'Some frequently abused drugs have the potential to contribute to any cardiac-related morbidity or mortality that may arise in the context of taser use'¹⁰.

⁵ PSDB 19/05, pp iv.

⁶ Journal of the Academy of Emergency Medicine, Vol 14, Issue 5 , pp 63 and 104, 2007

⁷ See www.amnestyusa.org/print.php .

⁸ UN Committee Against Torture, (USA Report) July 2006, para 35.

⁹ Strote,J.;Range Hutson,H., Taser use in restraint-related deaths, Journal of Prehospital Emergency Care, Vol 10, Issue 4, pp 447-450, 2006.

¹⁰ PSDB 19/05, pp 48.

A jury¹¹ in the USA in June 2008 found that the use of a Taser for an extended duration contributed 15% to the death of a man. The man's own actions, including toxic methamphetamine ingestion, were found liable for 85%. The jury exonerated the City of Salinas, the Salinas Police Department and the five police officers from any liability and found that excessive force was not used. Taser was assigned the 15% liability for negligent failure to warn that extended or multiple Taser CED applications on compromised individuals could contribute to cardiac arrest. Compensatory and punitive damages were awarded against Taser. Taser International is appealing against the decision.

That case is the first legal finding of a Taser CED contributing to a cause of death out of seventy (70) cases. The case highlights the importance of appropriate policies, robust training and effective warnings about the use of the Taser. The International Association of Chiefs of Police has a useful model policy on CEDs for police services¹². Taser International provides training updates at www.taser.com.

If the Taser is not the cause of death, what is?

Amongst many possible causes of death, excited delirium is thought to result in some deaths where a Taser is used. This is delirious behaviour that is very physically active and extremely strong, violent, combative and/or mentally agitated to the point where it can result in death. Excited delirium may be caused by illegal stimulant drugs, alcohol withdrawal, psychoses or acute manic crises. Other possible causes of death include drug overdose and positional asphyxia where the weight of an officer on the person's chest in an attempt to restrain the person may cause death.

Is a Taser used on officers during training?

Yes, it is used extensively on police officers during Taser training.

When should a Taser not be used?

The Taser has an effective range of 4.6 metres. It may be impossible for officers to safely get within effective range of offenders who are armed with knives, iron bars etc. Offenders who are moving rapidly also increase the likelihood that both barbs may not connect and hence the Taser would be ineffective.

What kind of accountability is built into Taser use?

The latest Taser automatically stores, in an encrypted data file, the time, date duration, temperature and battery status of the last 2000 firings. This can be

¹¹ Betty Lou Heston, et al. v. City of Salinas, Taser International Inc, et al

¹² See www.theiacp.org/pubinfo/PolCtr.htm.

downloaded to a computer via a USB connection.¹³ The serial number of the cartridge used is also recorded. If a Taser Cam is fitted, it makes an audio and video record of the event when the device is in on-mode. An infra-red assist capacity is available for use in low-light conditions.

Does the use of the Taser by police have other advantages?

Most importantly, use of the Taser does reduce the risk of injury to police officers, combative subjects and people in the vicinity. It gives officers a wider range of options in conflict management scenarios, including those most associated with self-defence and restraint¹⁴. It can minimize the need for officers to use other, more harmful, techniques on suspects and offenders.

Reinforcing the great benefit of getting Tasers out to frontline police, the Queensland Coroner, Michael Barnes in March 2008 found that the deaths of four mentally ill men, shot by police in separate violent standoffs, all could have been prevented had Tasers been available. The Queensland Government announced in July 2008 that it will roll out 3000 Tasers state-wide over the next twelve months.

25 July 2008

¹³ PSDB 19/05, pp 58.

¹⁴ PSDB 19/05, pp 98.

