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Tuesday 27 February 2001

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Alternative to lethal force could still prove fatal to some

Amnesty urges police to suspend Taser use

Randy Boswell

The Ottawa Citizen

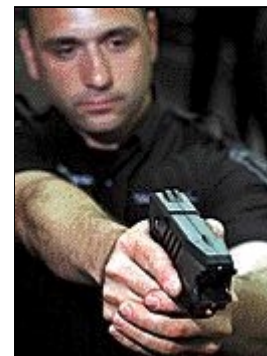
Amnesty International has urged police forces in cities across Canada -- including Ottawa -- to suspend their use of Taser electric stun guns pending independent medical testing to prove their safety.

The hand-held Taser device, which can subdue an individual with a pulsating electrical current that overpowers the target's nervous system, has been used on several occasions in Ottawa, mainly to help police arrest suspects with psychiatric problems who are threatening violence to themselves or others.

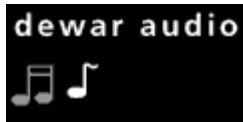
The Taser received a national spotlight earlier this month when police in Toronto -- in an incident captured by television news cameras -- used the device to subdue a man in a park who appeared to be holding a gun. A two-hour standoff ended when the suspect was knocked down by 50,000 volts shot from the Taser.

"I thought it worked out great," said Toronto police Const. Derrick Goobie following the incident.

"He's not hurt. We're not hurt. Everybody's safe. That's the way we're



Bruno Schlumberger, Ottawa Citizen / Const. Leo Benvenuti demonstrates use of Taser gun.



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...it's not hurt. We're not hurt. Everybody's safe. That's the way we're supposed to resolve it."

Although Amnesty noted that police use of Tasers could ultimately prove beneficial by giving officers an alternative to using lethal force, a report released yesterday raised concerns that a sudden, high-powered electric shock could, in fact, prove fatal to some people.

"We believe these devices have the potential to be very useful," said John Tackaberry, an Amnesty spokesman in Ottawa. But he said there are at least two cases in the United States in which individuals hit with a Taser "superbolt" might have died as a result.

"We're concerned about people with a pre-existing medical condition," he said, adding that evidence of product safety for stun guns has been provided by manufacturers rather than independent researchers.

Several Ontario cities began using Tasers after the provincial government approved a pilot project last year. In Ottawa, police began using Tasers last June.

The weapon, which looks somewhat like a handgun, shoots a pair of thin wires ending in barbed probes.

When the probes attach to their target, the Taser sends out an electrical current of 50,000 volts. The shock induces muscle spasms in the target's body, causing instant, but temporary, paralysis.

At a demonstration of the Taser last summer, Ottawa police indicated that heart doctors had been consulted to ensure that a person using a pacemaker wouldn't be killed by a stun gun.

"We certainly hope that in the next six months we don't have to use the darn thing," said Chief Vince Bevan at the time. "But I don't think any of us are presumptuous enough to think that we won't need the thing from time to time."

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