

Amnesty Irrational?

A few weeks ago, this paper ran an editorial titled "No Prisoners Should be Shocked to Death," regarding the recent in custody death of an inmate in the Virginia Department of Corrections after a stun gun was used to subdue him. Citing strong support from Amnesty International, the writer called for a ban on all electronic weapons. In fact, Amnesty has opposed virtually all less-lethal weapons on the grounds that law enforcement officers could use them to abuse suspects.

This article is one of many in which Amnesty International purports that these weapons, stun guns in particular, are dangerous and have killed people. Yet, there is no basis for this claim. The autopsy found that the inmate died of "cardiac arrhythmia due to stress while being restrained following stunning with Ultron II device (a brand of stun gun)". First, the autopsy drew no causal relationship to the use of the stun gun – read the sentence again – cardiac arrhythmia due to stress while being restrained **following** stunning...

In fact, there's a lot of information that Amnesty International has a habit of omitting in their quest to make a political statement. For example, in this instance, the inmate, Frazier, was an insulin dependent diabetic who had been having seizures for hours prior to a protracted fight as he resisted several prison guards attempting to restrain him for an hour. The guards also used a stun gun in the struggle. Following the struggle, while being restrained, Frazier fell into a coma and died three days later. I don't mean to gloss over the tragedy of his death, but to scapegoat the stun equipment seems completely inappropriate. Moreover, for the headline of the op/ed to read "shocked to death is erroneous." I've had the good fortune to work with leading medical experts on this subject, and I have never heard of a mechanism wherein an electrical stun device would induce a coma. Certainly, diabetic comas are well documented. But rather than accept that Mr. Frazier's death was due to his medical condition coupled with the stress of a protracted fight, Amnesty finds it expedient to blame the equipment and call for a ban.

In a similar article, Amnesty was quoted in a Pomona, CA newspaper that the TASER (another type of stun weapon) had caused the death of two people in California. I obtained copies of the autopsies, neither of which listed the TASER as a contributing factor, much less a cause of death. In fact, there has never been a death attributed directly to a stun gun in tens of thousands of uses.

I had the good fortune to have the opportunity to discourse on this topic with Dennis Palmieri from Amnesty International just a few months ago. During our conversation, we discussed a recent incident where one of our ADVANCED TASER weapons was used to capture a gun toting emotionally disturbed man in Toronto, likely saving his life. Surely, Mr. Palmieri agreed that this type of use is reasonable and Amnesty would supportive of such a logical use of this technology to save lives. The next day, an article in Toronto ran – Amnesty International condemned the Toronto Police for using TASER technology.

The fact is, less-lethal weapons are vital to modern policing and have saved countless lives over the past decade. Suggesting that less-lethal weapons should be banned because police could misuse them is about as logical as banning scalpels because doctors might cut someone. These tools have valuable uses and save lives when used properly – and the risk of misuse is vastly outweighed by the benefits. We have a database of over 550 uses of TASER weapons in the field (with no fatalities). Over 20% of the suspects shot with the TASER were suicidal and were attempting to incite police to kill them. By my math, that's over 100 people alive today because police had the technology to safely restrain these people without killing them. What is the alternative to subdue these individuals? Would batons, fists, kicks, and impact weapons be better?

In my opinion, the folks at Amnesty International have sacrificed integrity for sensationalism in what could otherwise be an admirable cause. Paradoxically, if federal and state governments actually listened to Amnesty International and banned less-lethal weapons, more of the people Amnesty is chartered to protect would end up dead. Law enforcement officers put their lives on the line to protect the rest of citizens every day. They deserve the tools to help them safely do their jobs. And they deserve a little more credit.

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