

Tests: Taser gun not factor in death of homeless man

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HOLLYWOOD • The Broward County Medical Examiner's Office said a shot from a Taser gun did not contribute to the death of a homeless man who died in late January after struggling with Hollywood police. Tests revealed Vinnie Del'Ostia had cocaine in his system, but the medical examiner would not release the cause of death Tuesday.

Hollywood police spokesman Tony Rode said the department has always felt Tasers are safe and that officials are satisfied with the medical examiner's findings. The department has used Tasers for



Vinnie Del'Ostia, 31, died Jan. 27 after Hollywood police tried to subdue him.

more than a year and has experienced no problems, he said.

Del'Ostia, 31, a diagnosed schizophrenic with a history of drug abuse, stumbled into the Entrada Motel on Federal Highway in Hollywood on Jan. 27, behaving erratically and damaging property. He

refused to comply with police demands to lie on the ground, so an officer shot him with a 50,000-volt M-26 Taser.

Officers on the scene said Del'Ostia ripped the probes from his chest after being hit and continued to behave irrationally.

After wrestling him to the ground, officers said they noticed he was having trouble breathing and called for paramedics. Del'Ostia was dead before he could be taken to a hospital, Hollywood fire officials said.

Toxicology tests revealed Del'Ostia had cocaine in his

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system and died from causes unrelated to the Taser, said an employee with the Medical Examiner's Office.

The Taser, also known as a stun gun, fires two projectile darts, connected to the weapon by wires, that reach a subject up to 21 feet away. The charge causes muscle contractions but not heart contractions, said Dr. Richard Luceri, director of the Arrhythmia Center at Holy Cross Hospital in Fort Lauderdale.

Luceri is an expert in arrhythmia and sudden death and is not affiliated with the Medical Examiner's Office.

A 1991 study by the University of Southern California said it found at least one death from the original Taser device, whose technology is the basis for the Taser International gun used by Hollywood police and about 1,100 other police departments around the country. Taser International is only 8 years old, and no deaths have been linked to its product, a company spokesman has said.

For a Taser to be deadly, it would have to expose a subject to certain amounts of voltage and current long enough to do damage, said Luceri. He added someone who has certain drugs in his system is more vulnerable to cardiac problems.

"Heroin and cocaine are major stimulants that race the

heart significantly. Their senses are heightened by the drug, and they may not be aware they're having palpitations, so they just keep on doing what they're doing and that's what gets them into trouble electrically," Luceri said. "Forget the Taser, the circumstances are just plain old ripe to have cardiac arrest.

"Then comes law enforcement, and the person may put up a fight, which increases the adrenaline even more... I think the Taser is just another stimulant and is not causing cardiac arrest or the death."

Law enforcement agencies are not obligated to keep records of deaths from Taser-related incidents, and medical evidence on the subject is murky.

That's what bothers civil liberties groups like Amnesty International, who argue that not enough research has been done on stun guns.

"These things have no place in policing, especially if they have no accountability structured around them," said Dereck Kayongo, an Amnesty International spokesman. "We think Tasers should be the last resort if they are a resort at all. The police have had various mechanisms to subdue suspects before Tasers came along."

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