

Volume 7, Issue 5 \$4.25

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2000

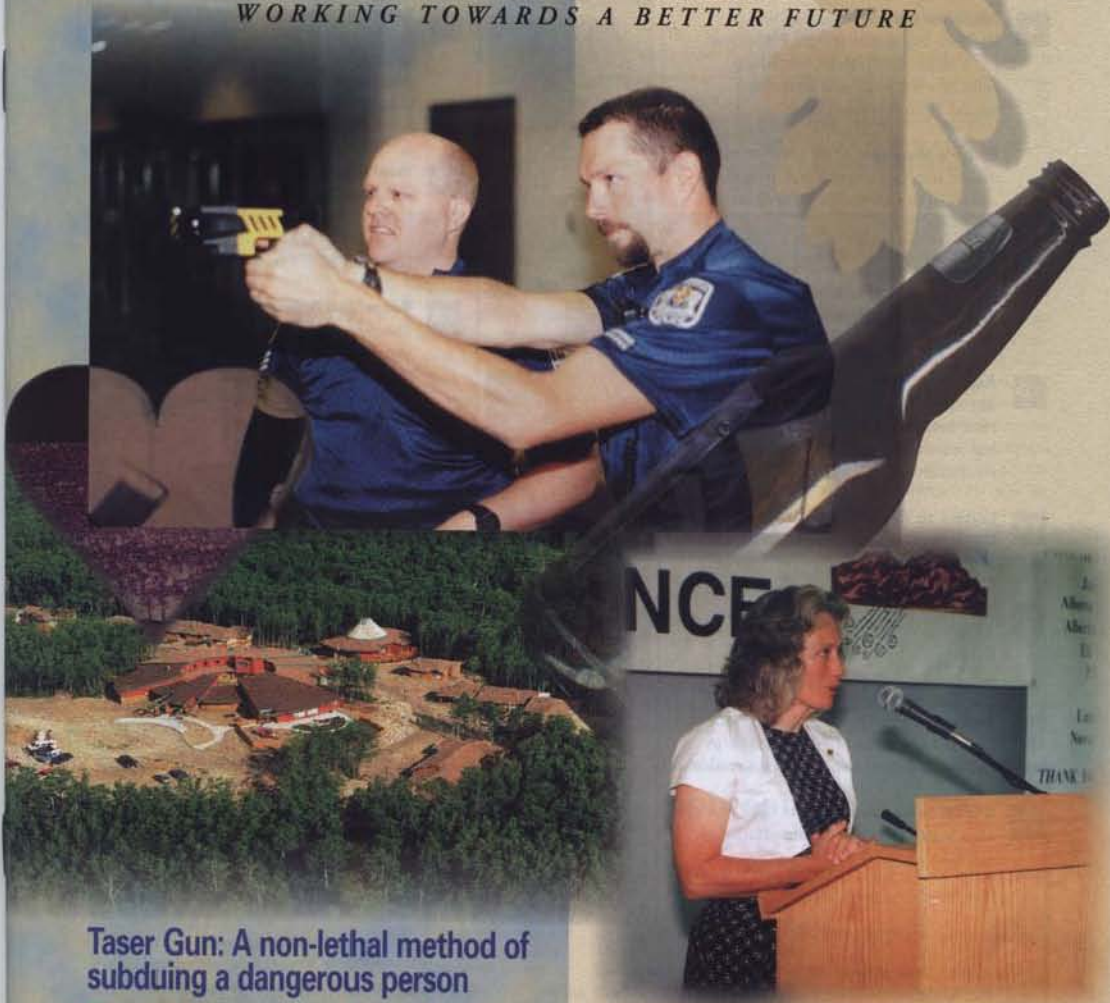
SCHIZOPHRENIA

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WORKING TOWARDS A BETTER FUTURE

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Canada Post Canadian
Publications Agreement Number 489248

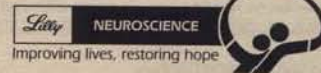


Taser Gun: A non-lethal method of subduing a dangerous person

Flag of Hope winner Francine Chisholm of Winnipeg

Mental Health in Prison: Western Canada's Healing Lodge for women.

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HIGH-TECH, NON-LETHAL WEAPON NEW OPTION FOR POLICE!



Sgt. Darren Laur holds the Taser gun outside Victoria, B.C. Police headquarters.

"PEOPLE ARE OFTEN HORRIFIED WHEN THEY HEAR 50,000 VOLTS, BUT IT'S THE AMPERAGE OR WATTS THAT KILL, NOT THE VOLTS," SAYS SGT. DARREN LAUR OF THE VICTORIA B.C. POLICE DEPT.

By Kathy Smith

almost all B.C. provincial police departments are using the Taser, as well as four RCMP detachments. The RCMP is also moving to adopt the gun nationally.

The M26 (current model used by Victoria police) Taser gun shoots two darts to a range of 21 feet. The darts deliver 50,000 volts and just 26 watts of electrical current which can penetrate two inches of clothing. The effects are immediate. It totally overrides the nervous system of the person hit, and that person falls to the ground, but fully recovers within minutes.

The Taser also uses a laser-sighting system, much like a laser pointer. Police can aim the Taser at a person, illuminate the target area with a red dot and tell them they are about to be shot with 50,000 volts. "Everyone has an innate fear of electrical current," says Laur, citing that in most cases upon hearing this, people become compliant right away. "It is increasingly safe for the officer and the subject we're trying to control," he says.

Unfortunately, there are a lot of myths surrounding the Taser, which is why it has been so difficult to get it approved here in Canada. One such myth is the assumption that being shot with electrical current will result in people suffering heart attacks or seizures. "People are often horrified when they hear 50,000 volts, but it's the amperage or watts that kill, not the volts," says Laur. Myths were also the reason for the B.C. provincial Attorney General's initial reluctance to sanction the gun's use.

Laur firmly reassures that people are not being electrocuted by the Taser, a fact that is backed up by countless research studies done in the United States which have been thoroughly reviewed by the University of Ottawa Heart Institute. The Taser's darts may puncture a person's skin, producing a small red burn mark, but the sore will usually heal within a few days. Secondary traumas are

more likely to harm individuals, for instance, injuries sustained by falling after being hit. So far, no deaths have been linked to the Taser.

Taser technology also includes a way of recording the number of times the gun has been used and in what situations, so accountability is also part of the package. "If a police officer uses the Taser inappropriately, they will be held responsible for their actions," says Laur.

Other typical non-lethal methods of police control include pepper spray, the baton, and bean bags, but as Laur points out, these methods may not be effective if a person is pain-resistant, which can sometimes be the case when someone is under the influence of drugs, alcohol or is in a state of psychosis.

Richard Dolman, provincial British Columbia Schizophrenia Society board member and a founding member of the Police Mental Health Committee of the B.C. Association of Chiefs of Police says the provincial BCSS branch voted earlier this year to support the Taser as a less lethal option for police dealing with the mentally ill. "The key is there's no lasting injury involved," says Dolman. The branch has also recommended the use of Tasers throughout B.C. by year end. "We have been pressing our sister organizations to take a similar stand," he says.

The Schizophrenia Society of Canada is currently examining the Taser, but does not have a formal policy on it as yet. "We're looking at or trying to encourage the least violent or terminal end to any kind of dispute with police and persons with schizophrenia or any mental illness," says Barry Boyack, Executive Director. "From what I've heard so far, it's less damaging in terms of other methods, so it's worth investigating."

A simple four-hour training program is used to instruct Victoria officers in the use of the Taser. Presently there are two Tasers per watch here. "My goal would be to see a Taser in every patrol car," says Laur, who hopes to have all members of his department trained within the next year.

Laur reports that since his initial field study, additional police departments in Canada as well as other commonwealth countries are also looking at obtaining the Taser as part of their use-of-force options. "This is something that makes me feel very good," he says, "because I know this weapon will save lives."

A delusional woman, armed with scissors locks herself in a bathroom. When officers arrive, she stabs at them as they attempt to subdue her. Even pepper spray does not affect her. When she finally leaves the bathroom, she rushes at police who then shoot her with a Taser gun and take her into custody without further problems.

This incident was part of the first-ever Canadian law enforcement field study of the Taser gun, an electrical stunning device. Headed by Sgt. Darren Laur of the Victoria, B.C. Police Department, the six-month study (Dec. 15, 1998 to June 15, 1999) came about due to an initiative to find alternative, less lethal options for officers dealing with unstable people.

"In these situations, a lot of people were armed with a knife or blunt object," says Laur. "We had full control in each situation."

The Taser was developed in the late 1960's by Jack Cover, who came up with the idea as a result of hearing about a U.S. commission which was looking into non-lethal ways police could deal with violent offenders. Cover based the Taser on a kind of stun gun he had read about in the Tom Swift fantasy stories of his childhood, thus the acronym, "Thomas A. Swift Electrical Rifle".

First used by the Los Angeles Police Department in 1976, the Taser is now used by hundreds of police departments in the U.S. And, as a result of the Victoria study,