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NEWS

Virginia Suspends Use Of Stun Gun

By DWIGHT F. BLINT
The Hartford Courant

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Virginia prison officials have suspended the use of a stun gun after an autopsy implicated the device in last year's death of a Connecticut inmate at Wallens Ridge State Prison.

The device, the Ultron II, was used on Connecticut inmate Lawrence Frazier, 50, during an altercation with guards last June. Although the state medical examiner's office concluded Frazier died of natural causes, the recently completed autopsy found that Frazier "died of cardiac arrhythmia due to the stress of being restrained after use of the Ultron II."

"Due to comments contained in the medical examiner's report, the department is issuing a statewide moratorium on the use of the Ultron II device," said Virginia Department of Corrections Director Ron Angelone. "This moratorium will remain in effect until issues regarding the device are clarified."

The autopsy report differs from the findings of Dr. W. Andrew Reese, who was retained by the Virginia Department of Corrections shortly after the incident. Reese attributed Frazier's death to a diabetic-related cardiac arrest. Reese, who is not a pathologist and did not perform Frazier's autopsy, ruled that the use of the stun gun was not a factor in Frazier's death.

The autopsy results are bringing new life to calls from human rights groups such as Amnesty International to ban the use of electroshock weapons. Amnesty International and other human rights activists have long argued that the stun gun played a role in Frazier's death.

"While Amnesty International welcomes this belated decision, it is of grave concern that Mr. Angelone allowed the use of this weapon to continue for 10 months after it was implicated in the death of an inmate," said Jodi Longo, Mid-Atlantic regional director for Amnesty International.


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And according to the group, inmates are still at risk because the prison system will continue using tasers that fire darts of electricity and stun belts that when placed around an inmate's torso and activated by remote control, can knock a person to the ground with an eight-second burst of electricity.

Frazier, an insulin dependant diabetic, had been suffering for hours from disorientation, seizures and other diabetes-related symptoms before getting help from prison officials.

In letters, inmates charge that guards delayed treating Frazier so they could restrain him with handcuffs and shackles before moving him from his cell to the infirmary.

According to inmates, Frazier and the guards became involved in an altercation in his cell and in the infirmary.

Virginia prison officials said during a struggle in the infirmary, Frazier, who had low blood sugar at the time, was zapped with the stun gun and then placed in restraints.

Sometime after the struggle, they say, Frazier lapsed into a coma. He died on July 4, several days later. He was serving a 30-60 year prison term for a rape committed in Westport in 1974.

Frazier was the second Connecticut inmate to die under questionable circumstances at the facility. Inmate David Tracy, 20, died after hanging himself last April, about seven months before he would have completed a 21/2-year sentence for selling drugs.

Dennis Kaufman, a company spokesman for Stun Tech, which manufactures the Ultron II, said Thursday he doubts the weapon was responsible for Frazier's death. He said about 15,000 Ultron II devices are currently being used nationwide. The Ultron II delivers 50,000 volts of electricity.


"And there's never been a death attributed or linked to it," Kaufman said.


Connecticut officials sent about 500 inmates to Wallens Ridge in 1999 to ease crowding in Connecticut. Most Connecticut inmates are now being housed in the medium-security Greensville Correctional Center in Jarratt, Va.

The switch to Greensville came after Connecticut's Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities investigated inmate complaints about the treatment at Wallens Ridge and found troubling patterns at the prison. The commission has twice called for the return of the inmates to Connecticut.

The FBI is investigating Wallens Ridge at the request of the New Mexico attorney general. The inquiry was sought after inmates from New Mexico complained about beatings, misuse of stun guns and lack of medical attention.



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