

Investigation underway after man shot with Taser dies

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HALIFAX - Nova Scotia became the latest Canadian jurisdiction to announce a review Taser use after the death of a 45-year-old man at a prison early Thursday morning.

"At the same time, RCMP are being called in to investigate the circumstances of the death... and I understand Halifax Regional Police will also have the RCMP conduct an external investigation into the arrest," said Nova Scotia Justice Minister Cecil Clarke, who ordered the review after the death. Police did not identify the man, but his sister, Joanna Blair of Shelburne, N.S. said he is Howard Hyde of Dartmouth, N.S.



CREDIT: Handout

An undated photo of Howard Hyde, who died approximately 30 hours after being shot by a Taser.

"I also want to offer my condolences to the family at this difficult time," said Clarke.

The review will examine Taser use in the province by police, prison staff and sheriffs. Similar reviews are underway nationally and in British Columbia where a Polish man died after a being hit by a Taser last month.

Blair said Hyde was diagnosed in the 1980s as a paranoid schizophrenic.

She said he was arrested on an assault charge after an argument with his girlfriend, with whom he has lived for three years in Dartmouth.

His girlfriend Karen Ellet said the normally mild-mannered musician and athlete had been arrested for assault after he hit her with a phone receiver late Tuesday night.

She said Hyde was an aggressive psychotic who was off his medications when he was hit by Taser by police. Ellet said she wasn't planning to press charges, because she felt Hyde wasn't responsible for his actions.

The news shocked her doubly because he was generally fit, she said. "How can he pass away? He's a perfectly healthy man physically, he was strong as an ox," she said.

Blair learned of the death early Thursday from a Dartmouth General Hospital doctor. "It was a shock, completely unexpected," she said.

Blair said a Taser had been used on Hyde once before, in 2005, when he was living on his own. Hyde resisted taking medication for his condition and went into a psychotic state. The family was concerned, so they contacted police, who ended up hitting him with a Taser.

Blair said the incident left him with a fear of the weapon.

On Thursday, Halifax Regional Police Deputy Chief Tony Burbridge said Hyde was shocked once or possibly twice after a "violent" struggle with two police officers and a booking officer at the jail in Dartmouth.

Hyde, who was five feet eight and weighed 150 pounds, was being booked into custody when he struggled with the officers and jumped a counter.

He was socked with the Taser in the thigh, but fled the building and was subdued after a second violent struggle, Burbridge said.

"He went into medical distress, was taken to hospital where he was cleared and released to police and sent to jail yesterday (Wednesday)," Burbridge said.

He died at the jail some 30 hours after the Taser was used on him.

Burbridge said a videotape of the incident has been handed over to the RCMP as part of their investigation.

He said it was "premature" to say if the Taser was linked to Hyde's death.

A spokesman for Taser International Inc. said the device could not be responsible because too much time elapsed between the use of the weapon and the man's death.

"That one is fairly easy to disregard the electrical application because electricity cannot linger in that kind of body," said Steve Tuttle. "Electricity when it does damage to a human body at high current will cause a heart to get out of rhythm immediately."

The police officers involved in Wednesday's incident are not under any "suspicion or suspension," Burbridge said. "This was just a normal night of police work for us."

He said every medical report he has seen on deaths following a Taser incident has shown no evidence to link them to Tasers.

He said police were justified in using the Taser because of the difficulty in restraining Hyde.

He said mace was not an option indoors where it would have affected the officer using it as well as Hyde.

There were reports Hyde might have been involved in a separate incident after the Taser incident that might have played a role in his death.

Burbridge said police have no knowledge of a second incident.

Police officers gave Hyde first aid at the scene before ambulance attendants arrived.

In the last five years, Halifax police have used Tasers 239 times. Burbridge said the figure includes just pulling them out of their holster.

Outside the House of Commons, Liberal Opposition Leader Stephane Dion offered his sympathy to Hyde's family, but added it is unclear what role the Taser played in his death.

"We don't know if it's really the Taser. I understand there was a delay between the death of this person and the moment he (was) shot. ... Certainly, the government must set clear guidelines about when to use the Taser," Dion said.

John Tackaberry, a spokesman with Amnesty International, called the incident "disturbing" because it occurred while Hyde was in custody.

Tackaberry said Amnesty had already raised "serious concerns," in a report about the use of Tasers in facilities "when people are already in custody and being restrained."

Besides the RCMP, the province's chief medical officer is also investigating the death.

Criticism has been mounting over the use of Tasers by police since the death of Robert Dziekanski on Oct. 14 at Vancouver International Airport.

Dziekanski, 40, had been in a secure area of the airport for 10 hours before being shocked with a Taser by RCMP officers after he became agitated. He died a short time later.

Video of the event, filmed by a bystander, has been seen around the world.

The case of the Polish immigrant has prompted several investigations including a review called by Public Safety Minister Stockwell Day on the use of Tasers by the RCMP. The assessment is expected by Dec. 12.

A report by the Canada Border Services Agency explaining its role in the Dziekanski incident should be delivered within days.

In other recent incidents, RCMP shocked a patient with a Taser at a Prince George, B.C. hospital last week. A Chilliwack man was in hospital this week after being subdued by police with a variety of weapons, including Tasers.

Thursday the B.C. Association of Chiefs of Police threw its support behind a provincial review into Tasers in hopes the process will win back public support for the device and the police officers who rely on it.

Association president Gord Tominson staunchly defended the Taser's use by police officers across the province, saying "If we didn't believe completely that they saved lives and prevented injuries... we wouldn't be using them."

Tasers use two barbed darts to deliver a jolt of up to 50,000 volts. They are intended to temporarily paralyze someone by causing muscles to contract uncontrollably.

Taser related deaths in Canada

Amnesty International says 17 people have died in Canada since 2001 after stun-guns were used by police. Besides the death Thursday of Howard Hyde, 45, in Dartmouth, N.S., the case of Claudio Castagnetta, 32, is also being reviewed. Castagnetta died in Quebec on Sept. 20 two days after being hit with a Taser.

2007

Robert Dziekanski, 40, in the Vancouver Airport in October.

Quilem Registre, 39, in Montreal after being stopped by police on suspicion of drunk driving, also in October.

2006

Jason Dean, 28 in Red Deer while running from police in August.

2005

Alesandro Fiacco, 33 in Edmonton, arrested while wandering into traffic in December.

James Foldi, 39, of Beamsville, Ont. while being arrested for breaking and entering in July.

Paul Sheldon Saulnier, 42, while being restrained by police in Digby N.S. in July.

Gurmeet Sandhu, 41, of Surrey B.C., while being restrained during a

domestic dispute in June.

Kevin Geldart, 34, in Moncton, N.B. in May during an altercation with police in a bar.

2004

Samuel Truscott, 43, of Kingston, Ont. was tasered by police during arrest. His death was ruled a drug overdose.

Jerry Knight, 29, a semi-pro boxer was tasered by police at a Mississauga motel in July after complaints he had become violent.

Robert Bagnell, 54, while in custody of the Vancouver police in June. He had cocaine in his system.

Peter Lamonday, 33, while being restrained by police in London, Ont. in May.

Roman Andreichikov, 25, high on cocaine and being restrained by Vancouver police also in May.

Perry Ronald, 28, while being restrained by Edmonton police after jumping from a window in March.

2003

Clark Whitehouse, 34, tried to flee the Whitehorse RCMP after being stopped in traffic in September.

Clayton Alvin Willey, 33, of Prince George was also high on cocaine when tasered by police while trespassing in July.

Terry Hanna, 51, was tasered by Burnaby RCMP in April during a break and enter. Cocaine was also involved.

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