

The subject who is truly loyal to the Chief Magistrate will neither advise nor submit to arbitrary measures. JUNIUS

THE GLOBE AND MAIL



POLICE RESPONSE

The trouble with tasers

When a police taser is used – with fatal results – because another weapon, the baton, would be bad optics in a crowded area, it's time to reconsider the raison d'être of the stun gun. Speaking after the death Sunday of a 40-year-old man who was acting irrationally at the Vancouver airport, and who was hit twice with the taser's 50,000 volts, Richmond RCMP Sergeant Pierre Lemaitre told the CBC that officers decided that using batons wouldn't look good in the airport. From its original life-saving purpose, the taser has become simply another weapon in the police arsenal.

Do the benefits of tasers outweigh the risks? No doubt in some cases tasers save lives, where a jolt of electricity is used as an alternative to bullets. Police argue, backed by some research, that it is not the tasers that kill – that underlying conditions such as drug overdoses and “excited delirium” (wild, irrational behaviour characterized by incoherence and superhuman strength) are usually responsible for the deaths of those individuals the police were trying to subdue.

But Sunday's death was the 16th taser-related fatality in Canada (six of them in British Columbia) in 4½ years. In the United States, more than 200 deaths have been reported. (In 30 U.S. cases, tasers were listed as a direct or contributing cause of death, according to Amnesty International Canada.) That's a substan-

tial loss of life linked to this “less lethal” use of police force.

The latest death seemed almost predictable. It echoed the scenario sketched out in a 2005 report on tasers by the Canadian Police Research Centre: an irrational man, violent for no purpose, struggles on and on. The man at the airport banged on windows and threw a computer. Did the RCMP at the airport have alternatives? They might have used batons, or physical restraint involving several officers; some of the officers might have been injured if they had done this. The man might have died anyway. The police research report, however, flagged the dangers of multiple discharges of the stun guns (which it called “conducted energy devices”); in fact, a large number of the deaths involved two or more jolts from the gun. The risks seem underappreciated.

The Commission for Public Complaints Against the RCMP has called on this country's civilian oversight bodies to conduct a wide-ranging review of police use of tasers. It's a good idea. While police say there is no conclusive evidence that tasers cause death, they have the onus of proof reversed; it should belong to those who use the weapons that seem at times to have catastrophic consequences. Unless police can show that tasers are reasonably safe, they should use them only as a near-last resort to the drawing of a gun.