

Better training, clearer guidelines needed on tasers, Quebec panel says

BY RHÉAL SÉGUIN QUEBEC

Quebec police need better training and clearer guidelines on the use of taser guns, a provincial task force recommends in a report tabled yesterday.

However, the task force — which began reviewing the use of tasers last April, months before the controversy over the weapons heated up — stopped short of recommending strict limits and constraints. The report argues that with proper training, police will be equipped to evaluate circumstances when the stun gun can be used.

“When used appropriately ... it is not a weapon that is capable of causing serious bodily harm or death. There is no research study or proof establishing a cause-and-effect relationship between the use of a stun gun and the death of a person who was exposed to it,” the report states.

Even though the report notes that in rare circumstances people died for “inexplicable reasons” after being struck by the weapon, the “undesirable effects” of the taser “are the exception,” the task force concludes.

The 24 medical experts, police chiefs and other specialists who wrote the report referred to an October, 2007, study by the American College of Emergency Physicians called the Inquiry Profile of Taser Electrical Conducted Energy Weapons. Out of 962 cases of people struck by a stun gun, only two died while in custody, according to the U.S. study. “The results of the inquiries and autopsies did not establish a link with the use of the stun

gun,” the provincial task force says.

In fact, most deaths after the use of a stun gun involved individuals who had taken drugs, were mentally ill or were in an advanced stage of agitation, the report says.

Recent incidents involving the taser provoked an outcry over what critics argue was its abusive use by police.

In Quebec City last September, Claudio Castagnetta was tasered at least four times by police.

He failed to receive medical treatment and died after banging his head several times during his detention. An autopsy found traces of amphetamines in his blood.

The Quebec task force recommends police call in immediate medical assistance for those struck by a stun gun.

Critics argue that if Mr. Castagnetta had received proper medical assistance, his death could have been avoided.

Polish immigrant Robert Dziekanski, who died after being tasered by the RCMP at the Vancouver airport, was agitated during a confrontation with police. Yesterday's report calls on police forces to weigh the mental condition of agitated individuals before deploying the stun gun.

“Quebec is the province where the taser gun is used the least often,” Public Security Minister Jacques Dupuis said yesterday in the National Assembly. “What is important is not the weapon itself, but the use we make if it.”

Mr. Dupuis said some of the report's major recommendations would be adopted immediately.