

PUBLIC SAFETY

Tasers have role in policing, RCMP watchdog says

Agency rejects ban on the devices but says they should be limited to only the most serious encounters

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VANCOUVER -- The RCMP should restrict use of tasers to the most serious encounters with people who are combative or pose a risk of "death or grievous bodily harm," the head of the force's watchdog agency said yesterday.

In a report on a review of the RCMP's use of the device, Paul Kennedy, chair of the Commission for Public Complaints Against the RCMP, also called for officers to be recertified every two years on taser use, a national co-ordinator on use of force techniques and equipment, and quarterly and annual reports on taser use.

"I think [the 10 recommendations] all flow logically, one from another. I think they are all necessary in the short term," Mr. Kennedy said yesterday from Ottawa.

Public Safety Minister Stockwell Day last month assigned Mr. Kennedy to review RCMP use of tasers after the furor over the death of Polish immigrant Robert Dziekanski, who was twice tasered by Mounties during a confrontation in the Vancouver airport.

In Vancouver yesterday, B.C. Solicitor-General John Les said he supported swift adoption of the recommendations.

"I think the recommendations he is making are balanced and reasonable," he said. "I support his recommendation that implementation should happen as quickly as possible."

He said he would talk to Mr. Day and the RCMP, which polices most of B.C.

Mr. Kennedy, in his 53-page report, ruled out a moratorium on tasers, declaring that "the weapon has a role in certain situations," such as when an individual is combative, or posing a risk of death or grievous bodily harm.

He expresses concerns about a "usage creep" since tasers were introduced in 2001 for use on individuals who resisted arrest, were combative or suicidal.

"This has resulted in deployment of the weapon outside stated objectives as illustrated by cases that have been reviewed by the Commission over the past six years, where the individuals have exhibited behaviours that were clearly non-combative or where there was no active resistance," he wrote.

"Current RCMP policy for [tasers] has evolved without adequate, if any, reference to the realities of the weapon's use by the RCMP."

He also noted that the RCMP has 2,840 tasers, with 9,132 officers trained to use them, but generates no empirical data on their benefits or detriments.

RCMP spokeswoman Sergeant Nathalie Deschênes said yesterday from Ottawa that the force would not comment on the report until after reviewing it.

Earlier this week, RCMP Commissioner William Elliott said ceasing to use tasers could threaten the safety of officers.

Mr. Day also ruled out comment before reviewing the recommendations.

"Our government takes this matter seriously and recognizes that Canadians must have full confidence in their national police force," he said in a statement.

Mr. Day said he was looking forward to a fuller report from Mr. Kennedy due next summer.

Taser International, the Arizona-based company that produced the device used on Mr. Dziekanski, said after reviewing the report that it supports measures to make police forces more accountable for their taser use.

"While Taser will participate actively in these ongoing investigations, I would note that 86 per cent of the law enforcement agencies with a taser program have approved use-of-force policies, based on their actual experience and research, placing the deployment of taser systems at the same level as pepper sprays."