

Tasered-teen case raises new questions for MPs

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Troubling new questions are being raised about the police use of tasers just as a House of Commons committee hears Wednesday from one of the inventors of the controversial stun guns.

Top of mind for many MPs will be the acquittal Tuesday of a 17-year-old Halifax girl who was charged last year with assaulting police and resisting arrest after she was tasered in her bedroom during a confrontation with three officers.

Politicians will also be interested in a Chicago study unearthed by CBC News which reportedly found the weapon may not be as safe as the manufacturer claims.

Tom Smith, co-founder of Arizona-based Taser International Inc. and chairman of the company, is scheduled to appear before the Commons public safety committee Wednesday afternoon.



(AP Photo/Toby Talbot)

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His testimony follows a provincial court decision Tuesday in which a Halifax judge had harsh words for the city's police service for stunning a teenager when she resisted arrest inside her home.

“The spectacle of a 17-year-old girl being tasered in her bedroom is a very disturbing and disconcerting one,” Judge Anne Derrick said.

The arrest happened last February in Dartmouth after the girl's mother asked police to remove the teen from their home. Two male officers and a female officer confronted the girl in her bedroom.

When they tried to arrest her for breaching the peace, she fought back. Two officers struggled with

the teen while a third hit her once with the taser.

Judge Derrick said the police had no legal grounds to arrest her, because there had been no breach of the peace, said Megan Longley, a legal aid lawyer who represented the teen.

“I still am astounded that ... three-full grown police officers cannot find some way to deal with a 17-year-old girl apart from using a taser,” Ms. Longley said, noting her client was unarmed at the time and has no criminal record.

“It certainly highlights for me the need for specific policies on taser use,” she said.

The girl, who is now 18 and can't be named under the Youth Criminal Justice Act, told reporters outside court she intends to file a complaint against the Halifax Police service and is considering a lawsuit.

“I just don't understand why I was tasered because I'm not a criminal,” she said.

Halifax police did not immediately return calls.

Mike Taylor, president of the Nova Scotia Criminal Lawyers' Association, agreed that the case raises serious questions about when and why police officers use tasers.

“To me, the taser is the last line before the gun is drawn. It's supposed to take the place of that,” said Mr. Taylor, a former Calgary police officer.

“It's just completely ludicrous that they would taser a 17-year-old because she was being non-compliant when there was no weapon,” he told globeandmail.com.

Mr. Taylor said his view on the necessity of the taser as a police tool has been shaken recently by some high-profile arrests and deaths. He said he welcomes the committee hearing in Ottawa.

“There has to be something done in a formal fashion, because some internal report from a police force is not going to satisfy the public at large that the police are being monitored appropriately in the use of the taser.”

CBC News reported Wednesday on a study by a team of doctors and scientists at the trauma centre in Chicago's Cook County hospital that found 11 pigs stunned twice with tasers were left with heart rhythm problems. Two of the animals died from cardiac arrest, one three minutes after being shocked, CBC reported.

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