

Taser CEO grilled by public safety committee

Stun gun manufacturer faces tough questions from MPs on Parliament Hill as part of study stemming from death of Robert Dziekanski

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OTTAWA — With his company under intense scrutiny following a high-profile death, and with a potentially lucrative Canadian business deal on the horizon, the CEO of Taser International vigorously defended his company's signature stun gun on Parliament Hill yesterday.

Appearing for nearly two hours before the House Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security, Tom Smith, chairman and CEO of Arizona-based Taser, maintained that his company's product saves lives and that there is "no other device with as much accountability."

The committee's study of tasers, and in turn Mr. Smith's appearance, were in large part prompted by the case of Robert Dziekanski, the Polish immigrant who died last October after RCMP officers tasered him at Vancouver International Airport.

While Mr. Smith said he couldn't comment on the specifics of the Dziekanski incident because of the many separate investigations into the matter, he faced tough questions from MPs about everything from Taser's legal bills to the potential lethality of its devices. However, none of the MPs called for an outright ban on the devices, and some said they believe the stun gun can be a useful tool for police officers.

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Some of the most difficult questions came from Liberal MP Ujjal Dosanjh, who was attorney-general of British Columbia around the time that Victoria police became the first force in the country to try tasers.

Mr. Dosanjh asked Mr. Smith whether he was suggesting that tasers played absolutely no role in the 300 or so North American deaths that occurred after the device's use in the past few years. Mr. Smith said the use of tasers was deemed a contributing factor in only about 30 of the cases.

It was during subsequent questioning about Taser International's financial relationship with Canadian police officers that Mr. Smith revealed the company had paid two Canadian officers for services.

One of those officers, Darren Laur of the Victoria police, was compensated with Taser stock after designing a holster for the device. However, it was not publicly known that a second officer was paid until yesterday's hearing. After the session, Mr. Smith said he believes the second officer was from a Montreal police force and was paid to provide taser training in Europe because he could speak French.

Yesterday marked Mr. Smith's second Canadian public appearance this month. Two weeks ago, the Taser CEO was in Toronto, fielding questions at police headquarters. The Toronto Police Services Board is considering a request by Chief Bill Blair to spend about \$8.6-million to equip and train every front-line officer with a taser.

A research analyst covering Taser International said a resulting purchase may be worth more than \$3-million in revenue for the company. However, it is unclear when, or if, the deal will go ahead.

Outside yesterday's meeting, Mr. Dosanjh said he'd like to see government funding for an independent study to look at the risks to those hit by tasers.

When he was B.C. attorney-general in the late 1990s, Mr. Dosanjh said, he was under the impression that, when the device first came to the province, it would be used only as the second-last option before firearms and used only sparingly.

Asked whether, knowing what he knows about the devices today, he would have had a different reaction to the introduction of tasers in B.C., Mr. Dosanjh said he's not inclined to take the weapons away from police officers outright. Still, he said, his reaction to their introduction may have been very different.

"There's definitely a question mark," he said.

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