

Curb use of Tasers, Mounties urged

'Usage creep' is a key concern warranting immediate action, the RCMP watchdog says.

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OTTAWA -- The RCMP watchdog says Mounties should drastically curb their increasing reliance on Taser stun guns to guard against "usage creep."

The Commission for Complaints Against the RCMP says the 50,000-volt Taser should only be used in touch-stun or firing mode when suspects are "combative" or pose a risk of "death or grievous bodily harm."

Paul Kennedy, head of the commission, cited "usage creep" as a major concern warranting immediate action.

Taser use "has expanded to include subduing resistant subjects who do not pose a threat of grievous bodily harm or death and on whom the use of lethal force would not be an option," he said in an interim report released yesterday.

His report says the Taser restrictions should apply in cases of so-called "excited delirium" in which suspects are in a heart-pounding state of agitation. Excited delirium has been repeatedly blamed to explain the sudden deaths of several people soon after being zapped.

Kennedy's interim report stops short of calling for a moratorium on the widely used stun guns. But it recommends revamped Taser training, stricter reporting requirements and more research on the controversial devices.

It follows an international furor over the death of Polish immigrant Robert Dziekanski. The 40-year-old man died Oct. 14 after he was repeatedly stunned and pinned to the floor by RCMP officers at Vancouver International Airport.

Dziekanski is recorded as the 18th person in Canada to die in recent years after being hit by a Taser. Amnesty International says at least 280 people have died since July 2001 in the United States.

Taser International, makers of the device, stress that the weapons have never been directly blamed for a death.

Public Safety Minister Stockwell Day asked Kennedy last month to look at how RCMP use the electronic guns, which can be fired from several metres or applied at close range.

Kennedy, whose full report is due next summer, says Tasers should be considered an "impact weapon" rather than an intermediate tool such as pepper spray or a baton.

The six-level police force protocol currently begins with officer presence and builds in intensity to: verbal commands; empty-hand control techniques; use of pepper spray, batons or Tasers; less-lethal force such as weapons that fire bean bags or rubber bullets; and finally deadly force.

Some 2,800 Tasers are being used by more than 9,100 RCMP members across the country. Mounties have wielded the electronic guns over 3,000 times since their introduction in December 2001. Yet Kennedy found no annual report has been produced, nor has the police force thoroughly examined its statistical information on Taser use in developing related policy.

But Tony Cannavino, head of the Canadian Police Association representing 57,000 members, wondered how Kennedy can substantiate his "usage creep" claims when RCMP Taser data have not been fully assessed. He also suggested Kennedy's recommendations are too vague and could wind up putting police officers and suspects more at risk.

"If you use a baton (instead of a Taser) you're going to injure the person," he said. "How do you define 'combative'? What is 'grievous bodily harm'? That needs more explanation."

An analysis of 563 incidents by The CP found that three in four suspects Tasered by the RCMP between 2002 and 2005 were unarmed. Several reports suggest a pattern of stun-gun use as a handy tool to keep drunk or rowdy suspects in line rather than to handle major threats.

RCMP Commissioner William Elliott said a force-wide order to stop using the electronic guns could compromise the safety of both officers and the public.

Kennedy's report also urges:

- Recertifying officers who use Tasers every two years instead of three.
- Creation of an RCMP national "use-of-force" co-ordinator to oversee policies, techniques and equipment.
- Stricter reporting requirements to ensure complete records of Taser use.
- Quarterly and annual RCMP reports on use of the electronic guns.