

Taser exec takes shots from audience

While he claims devices reduce serious injury, others fear their `excessive use'

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Proponents of Taser guns praise them as non-lethal alternatives to deadly force and an invaluable tool for law enforcement.

Opponents cite the 20 people who have died across Canada since 2001 after being Tasered by police as proof their use should be quashed pending further study.

Last night some of those opponents took turns firing questions at Tom Smith after the chair of Taser International Inc. spent an hour praising his devices as life-savers now being used by more than 12,000 law enforcement agencies.

While the use of Tasers has dramatically reduced the use of lethal force in some jurisdictions, they are not a substitute for lethal force, Smith told a public forum held at Toronto police headquarters.

"You don't take a Taser to a gunfight."

Studies conducted on more than 1,200 people show the units are very effective in reducing serious injury among both police and subjects and are far less harmful than other methods, including batons and pepper spray, Smith claims.

The slide show accompanying his presentation claimed more than 10,000 lives were spared death or serious injury.

When fired, the battery-powered device launches two barbed darts with 50,000 volts of electricity. The projectiles, which are able to penetrate thick clothing, attack the nervous system and immobilize the target.

Andy Buxton, of Amnesty International Canada, said studies show the use of lethal force declines when police officers are equipped with Tasers but "excessive use" takes its place, and that's why the agency wants a moratorium on their use pending further study. Ken Wood, an activist who claimed he has had more than one run-in with police, offered to be Tasered to prove they do hurt people, but no one took him up on the offer.

Social activist Don Weitz, 77, told the 80 people assembled that he's concerned the weapons will become the "toy of choice" for Toronto police.

The force's own studies show that people with mental health issues were the target in 30 per cent of Taser deployment incidents, he said.

Toronto police chief Bill Blair has asked the Toronto Police Services to consider equipping all front-line police officers with the devices. Blair's move comes after two jury inquests recommended increased use of Tasers.

Blair said he has passed on the information to the Ontario government and is waiting for an answer.

The debate on the use of Tasers, which has been raging for years, bolted to the forefront after the death of Robert Dziekanski at Vancouver airport last October.

The 40-year-old, who had never been out of Poland, was immigrating to Canada to join his 61-year-old mother in British Columbia when he was Tasered by RCMP officers after becoming confused and agitated during a 10-hour wait in the arrivals area of the airport.