

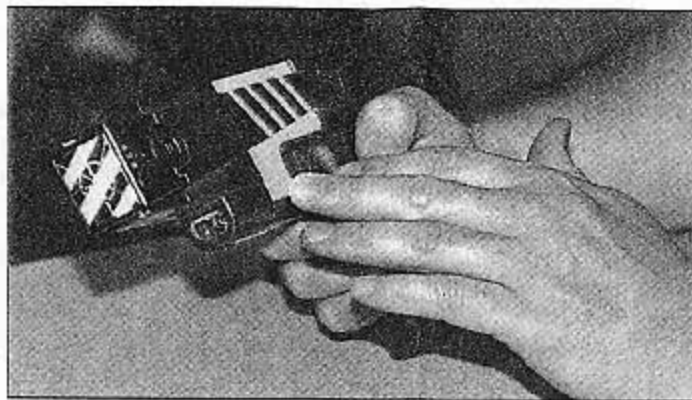
Local cops defend use of Tasers

By Victor Thompson
FLORIDA TODAY

Praised as one of the safest ways to subdue people during an arrest, Tasers are under new scrutiny since an Orange County man died after officers shocked him with the device.

Three Florida men have died under police custody after they were shocked with Tasers earlier this year, the most recent July 19 in Orange County. Medical examiners concluded that a cocaine overdose, not effects from a Taser, killed one of the men. Drugs also are suspected as the cause of the other two deaths.

Nassau County Assistant State Attorney Granville Burgess, who is investigating the Nassau County Sheriff's Office in the death of Henry William Canady in March, said there are discrepancies between the department's



Delinda Kamehm, FLORIDA TODAY

Officer Tim Lancaster of the Palm Bay Police Department shows a Taser the department uses. Local officers in Brevard County defend the use of the device to subdue criminals.

policies and training when it comes to Tasers.

The *Florida Times-Union* in Jacksonville reported that the medical examiners found high levels of cocaine in Canady's system but have not determined his cause of death, further delaying a wider investigation by the state attorney's office. "I have some questions according to their policy and how they're

being taught," Burgess said. "We're in the process of reviewing those policies."

"The way it happened, it could have been positional asphyxiation," he said, noting that Canady was on his stomach as he was being handcuffed following a Taser shock. "Part of the problem is that medical

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examiner's office is short-handed."

Official and newspaper accounts said all three men had been abusing drugs long before being shocked with Tasers.

There also is little or no independent research on how Tasers may affect humans with chemical dependencies or physical impairments, which worries human and civil rights groups such as Amnesty International.

"The fundamental issue is accountability and training," said Derreck Kayongo, deputy director for Amnesty's southeast region. "Not all of us have the same body conditioning, but that doesn't preclude someone from being violent. So how do we determine who is fit to take a shock?"

Amnesty International's U.S. branch posted a statement in January asking law enforcement agencies to suspend the use of the Taser and other electro-shock devices until further studies can be done on its effects.

"The possibility exists for ways to abuse it. It is our government's duty to strictly monitor the use of force," said Melbourne attorney Mark Tietig, chairman of the American Civil Liberties Union in Brevard County.

On the other hand, Taser International, which makes the Advanced Taser M26 and two less powerful versions of the gun for retail sales, maintains a three-page statement defending the weapon's safety on its Web site. The statement lists deaths in Hamilton, Ohio, and Philadelphia where men shocked by the device died under police custody and were also found to be high on drugs.

Police officers agreed the Taser's lingering effects are minor compared to chemical sprays, baton hits and other methods of subduing a person. Unlike the effects of pepper spray, which could last hours or days if not removed properly, once the five-second blast is over, most of the Taser's effect subsides, officer said.

"The Taser works on a principle of muscle dysfunction. We use a Taser maybe an average three times a week, but not every week is the same and there are sometimes it's not used at all," Titusville police Officer Joel Hunter said.

Hunter, who supervised training when patrol officers were outfitted with Tasers last year, said the device's sole purpose is to disable, not hurt.

In the past two years, five Brevard police departments — Palm Bay, Titusville, Indialantic, Satellite Beach and Indian Harbour

Beach — have trained most of their sworn officers in using the Advanced Taser M26, and currently use the device during routine assignments.

"Every user goes through the effects... It's pretty amazing. One minute you're standing up and the next you're on the ground," said Melbourne Police Cmdr. Mark Laderwarg. "I'd rather be 'tased' than get a mouthful of pepper spray, that's for sure."

Laderwarg said the Melbourne Police Department, which has a handful of Tasers but has not trained all of its officers, is considering buying more when money becomes available.

Each gun shoots two darts onto a person's body, and each dart is connected to the gun by wires that can extend about 21 feet. One sustained pull of the trigger emits a 50,000-volt shock to the person for a minimum of five seconds, which officers said is the amount of time required for the Taser to properly subdue a person.

Palm Bay Police Cpl. Tim Lancaster said the quarter-inch barbs do not need to penetrate a person's skin to be effective, and the full charge can travel through 2 inches of clothing. If done effectively, one shock will bring a person down without any long-term side effects.

Lancaster said small burns

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— Mark Laderwarg,
Melbourne police commander

where the darts make contact and sore muscles are some of the short-term effects. Lancaster, who led the department in becoming the first major department in the state to outfit all of its patrol officers with Tasers, said the device has lived up to its potential.

"We have probably about 64 patrol officers and it's mandatory that they carry it," Lancaster said. "It costs about \$600 to outfit one officer with taser, holster and charger."

Lancaster said that by February 2001, all Palm Bay officers responding to a call were required to carry one. He said he has worked with Jacksonville-based DGG Taser to promote the device and has been shocked three times during training exercises.

"We've used the Taser probably 100 to 150 times," he said, adding that officers are highly encouraged, but not required, to be shocked by the device during training.

"No officer or person that we've affected has had an injury related to hand-to-hand combat in 18 months," he said. "We're reducing the incidents."