



Coroner says Taser discharge didn't cause death

Suspected shoplifter suffered heart attack in downtown parking lot

December 7, 2002

OLYMPIA, WA -- Stephen L. Edwards died of a heart attack Nov. 7 -- not from the police use of a Taser, according to a report released Friday by the Thurston County Coroner's Office.

Edwards, 59, of Shelton died after being arrested by Olympia police on suspicion of shoplifting at Bayview Thriftway in downtown Olympia.

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Two veteran officers, Jeff Jordan and Paul Bakala, used a Taser to subdue Edwards, allegedly after he scuffled with a security guard in the store's parking lot.

The officers said Edwards had a handgun.

A few moments after police handcuffed Edwards, they discovered he wasn't breathing. He was taken to Providence St. Peter Hospital, where he was pronounced dead.

The Thurston County Sheriff's Office -- which is conducting an investigation into whether a crime was committed -- confirms that a handgun was recovered from the scene, but won't say if the gun was registered to Edwards.

"I won't release any specific details because we don't want to jeopardize the integrity of the case," sheriff's Capt. Dan Kimball said.

Diabetes and obesity were contributing factors in Edwards' heart attack, according to the coroner's report.

"The manner of death is natural," Thurston County Coroner Judy Arnold concluded in her report, which included scene investigation, Edwards' medical history, autopsy and toxicological analysis.

"The blunt force injuries sustained during an apparent altercation/struggle with the security guard and law enforcement officers were minor and did not contribute to the cause of death," according to Arnold's report.

"Analysis of the sequence of events leading to death and review of literature on the safety of the Taser indicate that the Taser application did not contribute to the cause of death," the report says.

The two Olympia police officers have been on administrative leave since the incident.

They could return to work sometime next week, depending on the sheriff's report and the decision of the Prosecuting Attorney's Office, Olympia Police Cmdr. Tor Bjornstad said.

The sheriff's report is expected to be turned over to the Prosecuting Attorney's Office next week, Kimball said.

Although the rest of the report compiled by the Sheriff's Office is important, the cause of death -- as found in the coroner's report -- is a large aspect of this and any criminal investigation, Kimball said.

There aren't expected to be any major surprises for the Prosecuting Attorney's Office.

A deputy prosecutor went to the scene of the arrest on Nov. 7 and the prosecutor's office has been kept apprised of details of the investigation since then, Kimball said.

"We'll give our report to the prosecutor's office on Monday and it should be just a matter of days before information is made public."

Ruth Longoria covers law enforcement for The Olympian. She can be reached at 360-754-5435 or rlongori@olympia.gannett.com.

Officers cleared in Taser case

County-led inquiry backs police in death of man at store

RUTH LONGORIA
December 13, 2002

A Bayview Thriftway security guard and Olympia police officers didn't commit any crimes in the Nov. 7 arrest and subsequent death of Stephen L. Edwards of Shelton, authorities concluded in a report released Thursday.

The report comes after a criminal investigation by the Thurston County Sheriff's Office and a review by the Prosecuting Attorney's Office.

"It is clear from the reports and the autopsy results that the officers and the security guard committed no criminal violations of the law," Supervising Deputy Prosecuting Attorney Philip Harju wrote in his review of the sheriff's investigation.

The 32-year-old security guard's name is being withheld because he is considered a victim in the case, sheriff's Capt. Dan Kimball said.

Files from the investigation were forwarded to the city of Olympia's prosecuting attorney for possible misdemeanor charges against Edwards' wife, Charlotte. Police believe she was involved in the suspected shoplifting.

Stephen Edwards, 59, died Nov. 7 after he was arrested by two police officers in the Bayview Thriftway parking lot. Edwards was struggling with the security guard when officer Jeff Jordan arrived, according to police.

Edwards, who was 6 feet 1 inch tall and weighed between 280 and 300 pounds, had thrown the security guard against another vehicle in the parking lot, according to police.

Jordan fired a Taser at Edwards four times in an attempt to subdue him, police said. Edwards had reached for a gun in his waistband, police said.

Edwards continued to struggle, despite the first Taser firings, and it's possible his heavy coat blocked the metal prongs the Taser discharges, Kimball said.

"Firing a Taser four times is not common, but something wasn't working or (Edwards) wouldn't have still been struggling," Kimball said.

A second police officer, Paul Bakala, arrived after the Taser was fired the fourth time and assisted Jordan in handcuffing Edwards.

A few moments later, they discovered Edwards wasn't breathing. He was taken to Providence St. Peter Hospital, where he was pronounced dead.

Jordan and Bakala returned to active duty last week after a Thurston County Coroner's Office report concluded that Edwards died of natural causes, not as a result of the Taser, Olympia Police Commander Tor Bjornstad said.

Edwards died of a heart attack. Diabetes and obesity were contributing factors in the heart attack, Thurston County Coroner Judy Arnold concluded in the report released Dec. 6.

That report was based on an investigation of the scene, Edwards' medical history, the autopsy and a toxicological analysis.

A handgun recovered from the scene is a five-shot, fully loaded Smith & Wesson .38-caliber revolver, according to the sheriff's office.

It was on record as stolen in 1997 from a gun shop in Bremen, Ind., Kimball said.

"We have no idea how Edwards ended up with (the gun), probably it was in several hands between the gun shop and when he got ahold of it," Kimball said.

A second gun, confiscated from Edwards' home after the incident, will be returned to Edwards' family members, Kimball said.

That gun was taken by deputies because it was on a coffee table while Charlotte Edwards was being interviewed, he said.

Tasers

A Taser is a hand-held electronic weapon that propels a pair of barbed darts attached to high-voltage insulated wires. The darts attach to the subject and discharge a metered, pulsed current through the subject's body, which causes loss of motor control.

On the Web

Olympia Police Department: www.ci.olympia.wa.us/Police/default.asp

Thurston County Sheriff's Office: www.thurstonsheriff.org

Prosecuting Attorney's Office: www.co.thurston.wa.us/pao



Probe: Physical problems, not Taser, killed Shelton man

Stacey Mulick; The News Tribune

Thurston County medical investigators have ruled that a 59-year-old Shelton man who died last month after police used a stun gun on him had a heart attack.

The heart problems, coupled with diabetes and obesity, killed Stephen L. Edwards, not the Taser application, Coroner Judy Arnold said Friday. She ruled he died of natural causes.

An Olympia police officer fired his stun gun once at Edwards on Nov. 7 in a grocery store parking lot. The electric shock did not appear to subdue Edwards, who was suspected of shoplifting at the store, police reported.

A short time later, after officers got Edwards in handcuffs, they noticed he wasn't breathing. He was pronounced dead a short time later at a hospital.

Investigators looked into the events leading up to the death and studied literature on the Taser in reviewing the case. The coroner's office determined the Taser did not contribute to Edwards' death, Arnold said.

The law enforcement community uses the Taser as a nonlethal way to subdue individuals and prevent serious injuries to suspects and officers.

Stacey Mulick: 253-597-8268

stacey.mulick@mail.tribnet.com



Shoplifting Suspect Didn't Die From Taser Gun

December 8, 2002

By KOMO Staff & News Services

THURSTON COUNTY - A 59-year-old Shelton man who died after police used a stun gun on him in fact had suffered a heart attack, the Thurston County coroner has concluded.

Stephen L. Edwards died as a result of heart problems, diabetes and obesity - not from being shot with a Taser, Coroner Judy Arnold said Friday.

An Olympia police officer fired his stun gun once at Edwards on Nov. 7 in a grocery store parking lot. Police said the electric shock did not appear to subdue Edwards, who was suspected of shoplifting.

After officers got Edwards in handcuffs, they noticed he wasn't breathing. He was pronounced dead a short time later.

Investigators looked into the events leading up to the death and studied literature on the Taser in reviewing the case. The coroner's office determined the Taser did not contribute to Edwards' death, Arnold said.

Tasers are increasingly being used by authorities as a nonlethal way to subdue individuals and prevent serious injuries to suspects and officers.



SHELTON MAN DIES OF NATURAL CAUSES

The Thurston County coroner says a 59-year-old man from Shelton who died after police used a stun gun on him suffered a fatal heart attack.

Coroner Judy Arnold says Stephen L. Edwards died as a result of heart problems, diabetes and obesity, and- not from being shot with a Taser.

An Olympia police officer fired his stun gun once at Edwards on November 7th in a grocery store parking lot. Edwards was suspected of shoplifting.

Shelton man died from heart attack, not Taser, coroner rules

Vancouver Columbian

The Associated Press

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