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Northeast man dies after police use stun gun in arrest

Officers said he was vocal after being hit. He had cocaine in his system, but whether it was a factor is still unclear.

By Thomas J. Gibbons Jr.

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A Northeast Philadelphia man reported to be brandishing a knife early yesterday died after police attempting to arrest him shot him with a Taser gun. It was the first such fatality since police began using the electric weapon last year, authorities said.

Preliminary tests showed the victim, Anthony Spencer, 35, of the 6200 block of Brouss Avenue in Mayfair, had cocaine in his system, police said.

Whether the drug played a part in the death of Spencer at 1:43 a.m. at Frankford Hospital's Frankford Division - 38 minutes after officers responded to a call reporting a naked male with a knife - will not be determined until autopsy reports and final toxicological tests are analyzed.

Police said that when officers arrived at the house, they found a formidable foe in Spencer, who was more than 6 feet tall and weighed about 280 pounds. They said he was naked outside the house and brandishing a 7-inch folding knife with the blade open. As officers approached, Spencer went inside, followed by police. Family members warned that he was still armed with the knife, said Capt. Thomas Lippo of the Homicide Division.

Spencer went upstairs to a bedroom and then came back down as officers tried to calm him, Lippo said.

"At this point, the male pushed past police and once again went outside," Lippo said.

Then, in an effort to subdue him, police employed pepper spray.

"When this had no effect on the male initially, the supervisor on the scene then utilized his Taser," Lippo said.

Police sergeants across the city carry Tasers in their patrol cars and are certified to use them after completing an eight-hour training course. The gun, which looks like a 9mm Glock, fires two darts, or probes, designed to stop a human with a 50,000-volt electrical current. Recovery time is almost immediate.

The Taser shot disrupts the muscles that control arms and legs while leaving the heart and breathing reflex alone. The weapon, which went into service early last year, has raised eyebrows at the American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania.

Larry Frankel, executive director, said Spencer's death "is reason for the Police Department to review their use of these weapons."

"If something was wrong here, they should take appropriate steps," Frankel said.

It was the first time a death occurred here after the weapon was used, police said.

After Spencer was struck with the current, he was handcuffed and placed in a patrol wagon for the ride to the hospital.

"He was conscious at the time. He was talking the whole time, ranting the whole time on the way to the hospital," Lippo said. "At some point, he became unconscious and expired."

The death is being investigated by the Homicide Division and the Internal Affairs Division.

"All indications are obviously they did follow procedure," Lippo said of the officers' actions.

Police said they were familiar with the Brous Avenue address and had answered a half-dozen calls there for domestic issues since Jan. 1. Spencer's behavior yesterday was nothing new, they said.

"We do have indications that he did have a drinking history in the past and he has utilized drugs, and as a result of that, sometimes he became irrational. And in this case, we believe that's essentially what happened," Lippo said.

According to criminal records, Spencer was convicted of retail theft in 1995. The next year, he pleaded guilty to receiving stolen property, and last year, he was convicted of unauthorized use of a motor vehicle, receiving stolen property, and a weapons offense.
