

# ACT stun gun use in doubt

## Approval based on 'flawed' data

By Ben Doherty  
Assembly Reporter

The safety of the taser stun guns used by ACT police is in serious doubt after the discovery of documents showing their approval was based on biased and potentially flawed research.

Documents obtained under Freedom of Information show the Australian Federal Police had relied solely on studies by US medical researcher Dr Robert Stratbucker to justify the use of the "non-lethal" weapon, which is on trial in the ACT.

Dr Stratbucker's 2003 research found the tasers — which immobilise targets with a 50,000-volt electrical impulse — were safe to use and had no long-term health impact.

But Dr Stratbucker's study into tasers has since been discredited, after it was discovered he had a financial interest in the company which makes them.

Dr Stratbucker was thrown off a US Department of Justice-sponsored study into the tasers' safety after it emerged he was a paid consultant to manufacturer Taser International and was listed on the firm's web site as its medical director.

The AFP has been testing the X26 Taser in Canberra since December, before Dr Stratbucker's conflict of interest was revealed, but announced last week that the trial would be extended by a week to include New Year celebrations.

ACT Policing bought six tasers for its trial. They are being used by Specialist Response and Security officers.

Chief Police Officer Audrey Fagan would not say last week whether a taser had been used on a person in Canberra during the trial. But the FoI documents, obtained by Civil Liberties Australia, reveal no independent medical testing of the tasers by the AFP.

X26 tasers have been heavily criticised in the United States for allegedly contributing to dozens of deaths.

At least one coroner in the US has listed electrocution by taser as the primary cause of death, and Amnesty International claims tasers have caused or contributed to more than 70 deaths since 2001.

There are no publicly available guidelines regarding the use of tasers, but ACT Policing has internal protocols about their use.

They have been adopted for use in every Australian jurisdiction except Victoria and Tasmania.



### THE WAY IT WORKS

- The X26 Taser is a "non-lethal conducted-energy" weapon which shoots thin wires into targeted people, then sends an electrical impulse through the wires to disrupt sensory and motor functions of the central nervous system of the person.
- It can shoot up to 50,000 volts.
- It fires in five-second bursts
- The electrical impulse is incapacitating, targets fall to the ground and cannot resist it.
- It is on trial with the Australian Federal Police, including the Specialist Response and Security unit of ACT Policing.

conducted to ensure they were safe.

"The AFP can hardly be said to have independently and objectively tested the weapon," he said. "The AFP has not indicated it has hired its own consultants to undertake independent tests or sought other expert opinion to support the claims about the weapon's safety."

In late 2004, the US Department of Justice established a \$500,000 two-year study into the safety of tasers, using Dr Stratbucker as an adviser.

But in May, Dr Stratbucker was removed from the study after the *USA Today* newspaper revealed his conflict of interest.

He defended his role in the study, "I have never felt that I had any obligation . . . to tailor the results of my research," he told *USA Today*.

Mr Williamson said the AFP's use of the tasers was compromised because the only expert medical evidence relied upon by the AFP was provided by Dr Stratbucker.

"Dr Stratbucker has a real and perceived conflict of interest and that undermines completely the integrity of his findings," he said. "No credibility can be placed on his research and findings."

An Amnesty International report published last year, *Excessive and Lethal Force*, lists 74 publicly reported deaths in which tasers were involved or were ruled a

doubt take pride of place in a home video titled "2005 — My dream season".

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In most instances, death is attributed to drugs, heart conditions and mental illness. But in July a Chicago coroner ruled that 54-year-old Ronald Hasse died as a result of electrocution from two taser jolts from a police officer. As well, an Illinois police department has filed a class-action lawsuit claiming Taser International misled law enforcement agencies about the safety of its weapon.

The AFP's report states that, "In 2505 incidents in the US in which the Taser X26 was utilised, 2348 of those incidents (97.43 per cent) involved the subject

sustaining either no injury or minor injury as a result."

Mr Williamson said those statistics were alarming. "The AFP's own statistics reveal that five in 200 people will suffer serious injury or death after being shot with this weapon. That is completely unacceptable."

ACT Police Minister John Hargreaves declined to comment yesterday.

A spokesman for ACT Policing said, "ACT Policing is currently conducting a field trial of the Taser X26. It would therefore be inappropriate for us to comment."

## \$2 Jackpot Lottery draw

**8484:** First, \$100,000, No 38717, Matraville; second, \$10,000, No 77178, North Ryde; third, \$5000, No 139041, Turramurra. Consolation prizes of \$1000 each, Nos 38716, 38718. The jackpot prize of \$2,150,000 was not won.

**Tatts 2 draw 7362:** 29, 24. Division 1 dividend: \$500.

**Tatts Keno draw 6123:** 3, 8, 10, 11, 15, 17, 25, 26, 29, 33, 36, 41, 51, 55, 56, 58, 66, 76, 77, 78.

Jackpot for next draw is \$2,000,000.

**Powerball draw 489:** 28, 13, 10, 31, 7. Powerball: 15. Total prize pool: \$6,541,650.94.