

Hollywood death casts light on police use of taser gun

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HOLLYWOOD · A mentally ill or drug-crazed man goes on a rampage, police jolt him with a 50,000-volt electric gun, and the man dies. Suspicion falls on the gun.

That scenario, repeated Sunday night in Hollywood, has caught the attention of police locally and around the country who are quick to defend the taser weapon as the best nonlethal weapon available. They say there is no evidence anyone has ever died from being struck by a stun gun like the one used in Hollywood.

Vinnie Delostia died Sunday night after a struggle with Hollywood police in which they zapped him in the chest with a electric gun. Investigators are awaiting a medical examiner's report, although police Lt. Tony Rode said it appears drugs killed Delostia.

Taser International, a brand name for the electric shock device used to stun suspects, is used by more than 1,100 police departments nationally, company spokesman Steve Tuttle said Monday. It operates by firing two electronic darts, packing 50,000 volts, onto the body of suspects, knocking them down and incapacitating them for at least five seconds.

Because the amperage is low, the shock cannot cause permanent injury, the company said.

One of Taser's strongest supporters is Los Angeles County Sheriff's Capt. Sid Heal, who has gained a reputation for testing and introducing innovative, nonlethal forms of weapons.

"Two things that occur together are not necessarily connected," Heal said. "This is the single best, most effective form of nonlethal weapon, by far. If that [Hollywood death] had been from a Taser, it would have been the first one in history."

Medical evidence is murkier. A 1991 study by the University of Southern California said it found at least one death from the original Taser device, whose technology is the basis for the Taser International gun used by Hollywood police. Taser International is only 8 years old, and no deaths have been linked to its product, Tuttle said.

Several people have died after being hit by a stun gun, research shows, but in nearly every case drugs have been found in the victim's system. Last month in Hamilton, Ohio, police stopped using the stun gun after a man died, but they resumed when autopsy results showed his death was from a cocaine overdose.

One area open to debate is whether the guns are harmful to pregnant women and their fetuses. Last month a woman stunned by Chula Vista, Calif. police gave birth to a stillborn baby two days later.

A medical report said the cause of the death was inconclusive, although the mother tested positive for cocaine.

"We haven't seen any medical evidence that a Taser has ever caused a death or injury to anyone," Tuttle said. "There is no physical way our Taser can put out enough power to do that type of damage. It can't happen."

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