



Te Ao Maramatanga

New Zealand College of Mental Health Nurses Inc

Partnership, Voice, Excellence in Mental Health Nursing

Position Statement on 2006-7 trial of Taser stun guns into New Zealand

14 December 2007

The New Zealand trial of the Taser electromuscular incapacitation device was completed on 31 August this year. The College strongly opposed the trial, especially in view of safety concerns about the Taser, and in view of the specific targeting of people in various states of mental health crisis (see College position statement http://www.nzcmhn.org.nz/uploads/21290/files/Taser_June_1_2006.pdf).

The Police are now considering the results of the trial, and are due to make a decision on a possible extension of Tasers to all police districts in New Zealand. As a result of monitoring the reports published on the Police website, the College notes the following issues as pertinent to any final decision on the place of Tasers in New Zealand policing¹.

Over the year of the trial, the Taser was produced on 120 occasions. In 20 of these cases the Taser was discharged (fired); in the remaining cases the person was either warned or 'laser painted' (i.e. had the laser light of the Taser pointed at them and warned that the Taser could be used). Of the total 120 occasions on which the Taser was produced, eight were identifiable situations involving people currently in contact with specialist mental health services. There may have been others involving people with mental illness, but on the basis of the publicly available data it is not possible to determine how many additional cases involved people with mental illness. For the purposes of this statement, the remaining 112 cases have been defined as 'criminal' cases, i.e. the individual who was subject to the Taser was the focus of police presence because of possible criminal behaviour.

Of the 20 occasions on which the Taser was fired, 12 involved 'criminal' cases, and four involved people in contact with mental health services. This means that the Taser was fired in 11% of criminal cases, compared to 50% of cases of mental health emergency. The College believes that further examination of this difference should be part of any consideration about extending the use of Tasers in New Zealand.

Two of the mental cases involved Police presence in inpatient mental health services². This is an unexpected and alarming development in the use of Tasers. The College

¹ All data provided in this statement is from reports published on the Police website.

² On both occasions the Taser was presented, but not fired.

believes that Tasers should be banned completely from inpatient mental health services, as is the case in some parts of the USA.

The College notes that over the period of the Taser trial there have been further reports from North America of deaths following the use of Tasers. These include the highly publicised death of a man at Vancouver Airport, and the death of a mental health consumer in Nova Scotia.

The College recognises that the Police play an important role in responding to mental health crises in the community, and notes that in the year 2006/7 there were over 8000 police responses to mental health incidents in the community. In view of the existing shared responsibility for mental health crises in the community, the College urges the Police to consult with the mental health sector (nationally and regionally), especially those involved in responding to mental health emergencies in the community, prior to any extension of the use of Tasers.

The College makes the following recommendations in relation to use of Tasers in New Zealand.

1. The use of Tasers in mental health emergencies over the period of the trial should be specifically investigated.
2. The Police operational protocol should provide specific guidelines relating to use of the Taser in mental health emergencies.
3. The use of Tasers in mental health inpatient facilities should be banned completely.
4. There should be wide consultation with the mental health sector, including service users, service providers, and mental health professionals prior to any decision to extend the use of Tasers in New Zealand.