

Remarks

by

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at the

Opening

of the

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Weapons

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Good Morning!

Let me begin my remarks by welcoming all of you to OPP Headquarters and be assured that it is a pleasure to have all of you here as equal partners in pursuit of common grounds regarding the deployment of Conducted Energy Weapons, better known as Tasers in the North American policing context.

However, even before going further with my remarks, I want you to know that based on my experience of some 40 years in law enforcement, eight years of which were spent as a Homicide Investigator with the Toronto Police Service having investigated a number of police shootings before the Special Investigation Unit came along:

I am absolutely convinced that **Tasers save lives and injuries for both citizens and police officers!**

Obviously, there must be some qualifiers that need to be taken into account and that to me is where the debate should be and not about the tool per se.

In my view, the qualifiers are no different that any use-of-force, be it a firearm, pepper spray, a baton or in the extreme a 2 X 4 used by a police officer in the lawful execution of duty.

However, the debate, from my perspective, has for the most part been hijacked by elements in the media, politicians and even Amnesty International. A month ago we had a huge controversy, yet again, surrounding Tasers.

Predictably, we witnessed another round of misinformation, miscommunication and misunderstanding about the police use of Tasers as a less lethal force option.

As you know, CBC television reported about some tests they conducted that we now know used questionable methodology and proceeded to misinform the nation that some Tasers were prone to operating outside the manufacturer's specifications.

Well, immediately the debate was on and quite frankly the police community in the nation became, for the most part, spectators to another media constructed moral panic.

I don't need to go over the details here – you are all familiar with them. The publicity generated by the flawed study resulted in more predictable damaging misinformation.

Several police forces decided to pull certain models of older Tasers from use and undertake independent testing in response. In essence, we were all over the map.

The OPP did not follow this response to what we viewed as irresponsible journalism. We were concerned about the questionable methodology used in the testing reported in the broadcast.

We also did not want to make an important operational decision based on a study we had not seen.

A study that we now know was flawed and probably influenced to some degree by a questionable media bias from the outset.

Tom Kaye can elaborate further about the media bias of which I speak.

We are all familiar with numerous scientific studies that indicate Tasers are reliable and can be used safely by properly-trained law enforcement officers. And, as stated, are a valuable tool for our police officers to use in an increasingly demanding and challenging environment.

Speaking for the OPP, our policies, training procedures and standard operating procedures for Tasers already meet or exceed the standards set by the Ontario government.

In Ontario, a collaborative relationship between the Ministry and provincial police services is probably a good model to influence and assist us to design a national framework for the use of Tasers.

Since it is relevant to our work of the next two days, let me briefly outline for you exactly what my position on Tasers is:

- I believe that Tasers save lives because they are a less lethal option for officers to use. Of course, the officer must be well-trained and fully accountable for all use-of-force options, including Tasers.
- Any use-of-force equipment an officer carries, including Tasers, must be legal, properly maintained and tested as required along with the requisite policies, training and reporting.

- Speaking for the OPP, we will continue to use Tasers as a less lethal use-of-force option, but we must also stress that any use-of-force will continue to be the last option for an OPP officer.
- Finally, I am a strong supporter of the joint Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police and the Canadian Police and Police Services Boards creating a national framework, training standards and testing protocols for the use of Conducted Energy Weapons.

The resulting framework may not be mandatory, but it will set a national benchmark we can all measure ourselves against and not be seen as acting in a divisive fashion when issues of Tasers again populate the national headlines.

And they will!

In a review of the history of the use-of-force option by police, I note that since 1994 five Ontario Coroner's Juries have issued recommendations favouring police use of Tasers.

More generally, five other inquest juries recommended the use of or research into intermediary, less lethal weapons and training.

Repeated Coroner's juries, with all the facts and information, recognized the value of less lethal use-of-force options.

But we are still witnessing a great deal of concern and controversy being expressed about the safety of Tasers.

There is no argument that, as police leaders, all of us, we must be held accountable and transparent to the public regarding the use-of-force by police officers in the lawful execution of their duties.

We also accept that we are held to a higher standard of accountability to not only earn, but maintain our credibility and public trust about all that we do – all of the time, especially respecting the use-of-force, Tasers or otherwise.

That is why it is important that we separate the facts from the misinformation and misplaced rhetoric surrounding the use of Tasers.

Given the high profile of some of the recent incidents, the public concerns are understandable.

We must not let their confidence in us be eroded by misinformation and the agendas of one questionable source or another.

What we, as Canadian Police leaders, all of us, have not done well, is effectively communicate how and when we use these tools and what steps we take to ensure that they are the best and least lethal option in the circumstances.

I think most of you will agree that the general public does not understand well the complex issues surrounding the use of Tasers and it is a critical issue for us to address in our deliberations.

So I am pleased to see that the development of a communication strategy on the use of Tasers is also part of our agenda going forward.

We will have a great opportunity over the next two days to work towards drafting a national framework for the safe use of Tasers by police in Canada.

That is our obligation as police professionals to the people we serve and the very men and women who are entitled to have made available for their use every lawful tool with which they can safeguard themselves and the members of the public.

During our deliberations, we will all learn from each other and benefit from each other's experience and wisdom.

The result should be an operational base line for Taser use in Canada. Once the recommendations are delivered and eventually adopted by the CACP, CPA and CAPSB, all Canadian police services will be able to consistently explain to the general public exactly how and when police officers will use this important piece of equipment.

Properly communicated, a national framework in support of policies and protocols on Tasers should help ease some of the public's concerns and help them understand the difficult choices a police professional faces everyday.

It should also help all police services ensure they are meeting credible standards on the safe use of this equipment.

So, ladies and gentlemen, we have some important work to do over the next two days. I want to thank you for your participation and your valued contribution.

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