



## Sheriff's Office defends policy on Taser guns

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The Alachua County Sheriff's Office will not change its policy on the use of Taser guns, despite Sunday's death of Mark Burkett four days after the weapon was used on him at least once in the county jail.

Jail officials insist the Taser gun had nothing to do with Burkett's death.

Burkett, 18, became the first person on whom Sheriff's Office personnel used a Taser gun, after he was admitted to the jail Wednesday morning and became disruptive, according to reports.

He was taken from the jail later that day in critical condition, and died Sunday night in Shands at AGH.

Taser guns have been used by law enforcement agencies for more than 20 years, and have been a source of controversy.

It was just last week that they were introduced at the Alachua County Sheriff's Office.

The weapons use an electric current to momentarily immobilize suspects who run, resist arrest or threaten an officer, Sheriff's Sgt. Jim Troiano said, adding that it's sometimes safer to use a Taser to subdue a suspect than to handle him physically.

"When you have to deal with people and lay hands on them, the potential for injury can be great," he said.

Deputies already can use pepper spray, a baton or in worst-case scenarios, a gun, to subdue suspects, Troiano said.

Taser guns offer another option which can be safer for both suspects and law enforcement officers, he said.

"Taser guns have been shown to produce no lasting injuries," Troiano said.

Other instruments such as batons can cause large bruises on a suspect's leg, he said.

A Taser looks like a regular gun, but when officers pull the trigger, two probes shoot out and hook onto the suspect with small barbs. The probes are attached to the Taser gun by thin wire cables that can reach as far as 21 feet. An electric current shoots through the cables into the suspect, causing the body to momentarily convulse. The suspect usually falls to the ground when shot. The person then can get up unless the deputy pulls the trigger again, delivering another blast of current. The probes are still hooked into the skin until somebody removes them.

Sheriff's officials who volunteered to be shot by the Taser for training purposes Wednesday said the jolt felt like a sharp blow to the back. There was very little pain, one deputy said, but the idea of being shot with electricity was scary. Several of the volunteers yelled out when the current hit them.

Wounds from the probe hooks won't bleed because the electricity cauterizes the wounds, Troiano said. The shooting can produce two temporary red marks on the skin.

Tasers use 26 watts and 50,000 volts. That amount of current won't affect the heart and is safe even on subjects with a pacemaker, Troiano said.

An official from the company that manufactures the gun used by the Sheriff's Office -- TASER International of Scottsdale, Ariz. -- said their product would not be able to cause any lasting injury on someone shot with the device.

"We don't even ask people when we test the gun on them if they have a heart condition or anything," said **Stephen Tuttle, director of governmental affairs for the company.** **"That's how safe they are."**

The device, powered by eight AA batteries, could deliver about 10 five-second shocks, he said. But, he added, company research shows that most law enforcement agencies who use the device rarely need to deliver more than two shocks to incapacitate a suspect.

**"If electricity is going to kill a person, it would happen when they get the shock," Tuttle said. "If it's going to get you, it would be right then and there."**

Sheriff's officials would not say if Burkett was Tasered in the few minutes before his collapse, citing the ongoing investigation.

University of Florida Chief of Cardiology Dr. Carl Pepine said that whether a Taser gun affects a person's heart probably depends on the current and frequency used.

"My suspicion is Taser uses very high frequency and the energy stays on the skin and stimulates the nerves," Pepine said.

Amnesty International charges that a 29-year-old woman died in July 1996 after being shot by police with a Taser gun in Pomona, Calif. The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department said that she had been driving under the influence of drugs and had crashed into a wall and a parked car, before resisting arrest.

The sheriff's deputy is reported to have described the Taser gun as "a kind of debilitating thing where the shock is supposed to catch you off guard . . . Something from the charge did not agree with her system."

After being shot with the Taser, the woman was taken to a hospital, where her heart stopped. The group also charges that officers of the Los Angeles Police Department fired Taser darts into Rodney King, whose televised beating by police officers preceded the Los Angeles riots in 1992. The sergeant was seen attempting to keep the wires from tearing or tangling, apparently preoccupied with his weapon rather than controlling his officers, while the Taser shock made King more vulnerable to the beating, the group claims.

While Air Taser Direct of Jacksonville, a Taser distributor, acknowledges on its Web site that there have been several reported heart failures in individuals shot with the weapon, they claim that in all cases but one there were sufficient amounts of PCP or other drugs in the blood of those shot to have caused the death. The one case in which the Taser was listed as a contributing factor involved a person with a serious heart condition who was on PCP, the company claims.

The Taser is not very effective when used on an emotionally disturbed subject or a person on drugs, according to a report issued by the National Institute of Justice.

Anyone can buy a Taser, but only law enforcement can get Tasers with such a high voltage.

Sheriff's officials have bought 20 of the guns at \$499 apiece. They will be used both in the jail and on patrol.

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