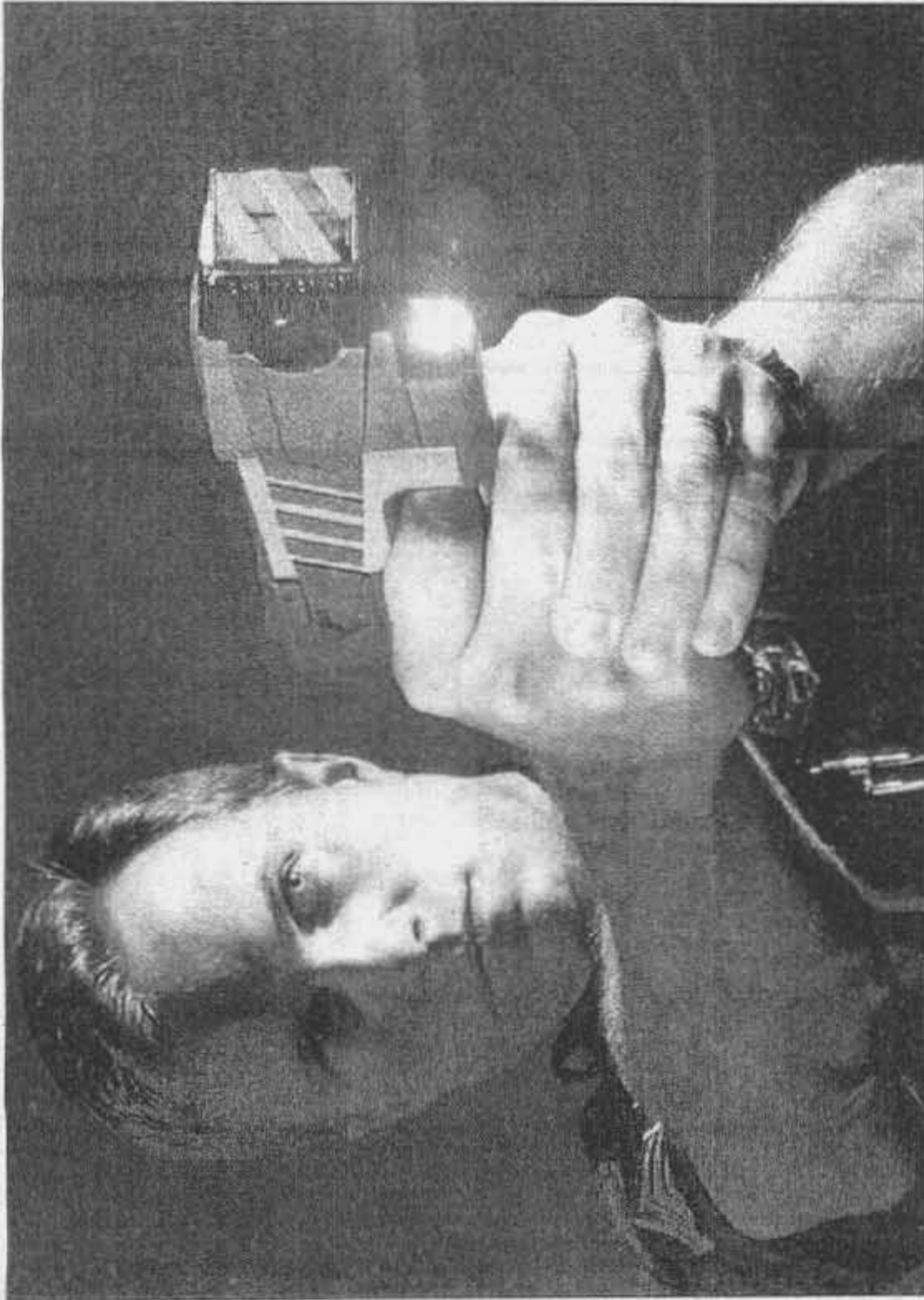


# Police to test 50,000-volt stun guns



Shock weapon: the taser is effective at up to 21ft and can deliver a debilitating electrical charge through 2in of clothing

## Tom Robbins

POLICE in Northamptonshire are to become the first to begin trials of a dart-firing stun gun that temporarily paralyses its victims with a 50,000-volt electric shock.

The non-lethal "taser" is already being issued to police in America where it has won praise for coming close to "100% take-down power". British police firearms experts are hoping it will provide a compromise between the truncheon and a conventional sidearm.

The taser looks like a pistol but simultaneously fires two probes that trail electric cable back to the taser. When they strike, a five-second 50,000-volt charge is delivered down the cable, causing the suspect's muscles to contract uncontrollably. The manufacturers claim the weapon will "physically debilitate a target regardless of pain tolerance or mental focus".

Last week the Northamptonshire force confirmed it was researching the taser and would be making a formal decision on whether to carry out trials within the next month. It said it would carry out in-house trials before testing the device on the streets.

"The vast majority of forces

## Shock tactics

The taser can stun violent suspects up to 21ft away



are considering CS spray first and foremost, which we are not doing. Therefore we have to look at something else," said a spokesman. "We are the only force actively researching the taser at the moment."

CS spray has aroused concerns that it could cause burns and breathing difficulties.

The taser would be restricted to trained firearms officers and would be used only where "an extreme police response" was required.

The model being considered, the Advanced Taser M26, uses an air cartridge to propel the probes and is powered by eight AA batteries. A laser sight projects a red dot on to the suspect and the device is effective at ranges up to 21ft and through clothing 2in thick.

The manufacturers claim that victims are left with no permanent damage. The device has an inbuilt computer chip which records the date and time of every discharge.

However, its use on British streets would be controversial. "While less-than-lethal technology appears to be safer than live ammunition, people who have them tend to have less restraint when using them," said Kevin McNamara, the Labour MP and former Northern Ireland spokesman.

"The question with tasers is: what are they going to be used for? Are they going to be used instead of negotiation in hostage situations, for example, so in stand-offs people would be stunned rather than talked out of confrontation?"

Amnesty International has campaigned against the use of tasers and other electro-stun devices and is particularly concerned about their use in American prisons where they "dangerously blur the line between torture and legitimate prisoner control techniques".

The most notorious use of the taser came during the beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police officers, whose later acquittal led to riots in which more than 50 people died. King was zapped twice by an older, less powerful taser in the course of the beating.

Nevertheless, American police remain enthusiastic about the weapon and in particular the M26.

The Los Angeles sheriff's department was so impressed that it cut short a six-month evaluation programme after four months and issued it to officers for the first time last week.

Sid Heal, head of the department's special enforcement bureau which runs the county's Swat teams and who volunteered to be hit twice by the device during trials, described its effects in glowing terms.

"When I got hit with it, before they could even turn it off I was already falling," he said. "It was what a psychologist would call a significant emotional experience. It is probably the closest thing I have ever seen to 100% effective."

The taser is just one of a range of "less-lethal" weapons being considered by the Home Office, partly in response to the new Human Rights Act which enshrines the "right to life" even for criminals.

More than £400,000 is being spent on a study of a range of alternatives to conventional firearms, including glue guns, bean-bag guns and lasers that dazzle trouble-makers.

"There is a hierarchy of response and tasers would be towards the more extreme end of that hierarchy," said David Wilson, professor of criminal justice at the University of Central England. "I still believe that CS spray can be a very effective and appropriate response in many operational circumstances."

There are, however, concerns that criminals may start using

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There are, however, concerns that criminals may start using the weapons before the police. Customs has seized a number of tasers being smuggled into Britain and others can be obtained on the black market in London for about £600.

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"The officers kept beating me and running the electricity through me so I could not stay still," he said later, maintaining that the laser had made him more aggressive.

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