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Epidemiology

TASERs only rarely associated with rhabdomyolysis

Last Updated: 2012-01-19 18:15:10 -0400 (Reuters Health)

By Rob Goodier

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - Conducted electrical weapons, of which TASERs are the best known, are only rarely associated with rhabdomyolysis, a new study found.

Data from arrests of criminal suspects at six U.S. law-enforcement centers showed that only 0.43% of more than 2,100 who were TASERed might have had rhabdomyolysis. Other factors could have independently accounted for those subjects' rhabdomyolysis, however, the researchers say.

All of the subjects recovered, although three suffered acute kidney damage. In all cases, creatinine levels returned to normal and no dialysis was necessary.

"We have over 2,100 cases of exposure to TASER with an incidence rate less than 0.5%. That's pretty significant. It's the first real-world study to shed light on the subject and prove what other controlled studies have shown," Dr. Barrett Bradt from Louisiana State University, who led the study, told Reuters Health.

Dr. Bradt and his team presented their data January 13 at the annual meeting of the National Association of EMS Physicians in Tucson, Arizona.

Out of 2,106 consecutive people who were subdued with the weapons, nine developed potential rhabdomyolysis. They were all males, average age 37, and they were shocked an average of 3.33 times.

The researchers said factors other than the electrical shock could have caused or exacerbated the muscle damage in all nine of the men, including heavy exertion, drug use (especially stimulants) and mental illness. Eight of the nine had run from the police or struggled to resist arrest. Eight were either proven or suspected to be on stimulants, and five had mental illness or acute psychosis.

"The TASER is probably one of the safest things around for restraining someone, and this study basically confirms that," said Dr. Joseph DeLucia, at the St. Louis University Hospital in St. Louis, Missouri, who was not involved in the research. He told Reuters Health, "As an ER doctor, I'd much rather have someone brought in who was tased than who was hit on the head (with a police baton) or worse."

Dr. Bradt points out that the alternative to the TASER is often a gun. He said nobody died following TASER use in his study.

Dr. Bradt's study, funded by the National Institute of Justice, the research-and-development arm of the U.S. Department of Justice, is ongoing.

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