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Pinellas County Taser Deaths—Excusable Or Not?

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COMMENTARY

By June Maxam

PINELLAS COUNTY, FLA—Between June 2001 and June 2007, nationwide there were at least 245 cases of deaths of subjects soon after having been shocked using Tasers. Of these cases, in seven cases, medical examiners said tasers were a cause or a contributing factor or could not be ruled out as a cause of death. In 16 cases, coroners and other officials stated that a taser was a secondary or contributory factor of death.

In dozens of cases, coroners cited excited delirium as cause of death. Excited delirium has been questioned as a medical diagnosis.

Several deaths occurred as a result of injuries sustained in struggles. In a few of these cases, head injury due to falling after being shocked contributed to later death.

In 2005, a medical examiner ruled for the first time that a taser was the primary factor in a death.

Apparently state attorney Bernie McCabe thinks he knows more about medicine and forensics than Jon Thogmartin, Pinellas County medical examiner.

Time after time, the office of Pinellas County state attorney Bernie McCabe closes out a case of death by a finding of justifiable homicide, finding that the police of the Sixth Judicial Circuit were justified in the killing of an individual, often with a bullet in the back or more recently, in the increasing deaths resulting by taser guns wielded by police.

Although McCabe refused to prosecute the Clearwater police officers involved in the death of Thomas C. Tipton, the case is now in court as Tipton's widow has brought a wrongful death lawsuit against the city, claiming that the officers who restrained Tipton and rescue workers were negligent, reckless, improperly trained and that the city had supplied them with "faulty and life-threatening equipment".

Thomas Tipton died at age 34 in April 2006 after a violent confrontation with a trio of Clearwater cops in which he was handcuffed, tasered and restrained face down. Thomas Tipton never got up.

The medical examiner's office ruled Tipton's death a homicide, listing cocaine and alcohol as contributory conditions. The autopsy findings indicated that Tipton died of asphyxiation resulting from being face down on a patio while officers compressed his chest. The autopsy report said the alcohol in his system could have hastened the asphyxia. The Clearwater police had tasered Tipton following an altercation at a motel on north Clearwater Beach, claiming he was combative.