

Demented Policing: Tasering the Elderly

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Australia is a country addictively hostile to the elderly. Despite being a continent that speaks to immemorial origins, respect for those who age is uncommon. In The Lucky Country, that seminal, repeatedly misunderstood text, written in frustrated, sour prose, Donald Horne observes that Australia is not a place where one should grow old.

And so, it follows: the rampant, habitual abuse of the elderly, seen as the gnats and brats of family and human refuse, the lack of community protections, the human rights abuses, all [exposed](#) vividly by the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety.

No Royal Commission could possibly deal with all the social and structural issues that afflict the treatment of the elderly. A central feature of the nuclear family remains its obsessive selfishness: the savaging of the older member is seen as not only natural but logical. Those no longer functioning in mind, bowel and being, are rushed off to the retirement village or nursing home once the age meter ticks over. Family members are assured that their discarded elders will be happy in their new prison, and the conspiracy between what is loosely called the "aged care sector", one racked by the most insidious of abuses, and the medical profession, is complete. All there is to do is wait out the time for the inevitable passing, and hopefully the old bats will have some spare cash left behind after the nursing home steals the bulk of the estate.

Before passing, the elderly individual will face the risks created by their environment, helped along by unhelpful carers, rapacious providers, and money-counting administrators. To this can now be added another risk: the prospect of being tasered by the police.

The last line deserves a place in a species of ageist dystopian literature with a social Darwinian slant, a sort of Mad Max for the Aged. But it is precisely what took place on May 17. Clare Nowland, a great-grandmother suffering dementia, found herself in a critical condition after being tasered by a senior constable of the New South Wales Police. The incident took place at Yallabee Lodge in the small town of Cooma, roughly 100 kilometres south of Canberra.

The Taser has a lengthy, rather nasty history of misuse. Comprising two barbed darts shot in Probe Mode, the recipient faces the release of 50,000 volts of electrical current lasting over 5 seconds. When used in its Drive-Stun Mode, the weapon is placed directly against the victim's skin, causing terrific pain, sometimes burns. The casualty list attributed to the Taser is a growingly ghoulis one. In February 2012, Amnesty International [reported](#) that the US death toll attributable to the weapon since 2001 had risen to 500.

The Australian-based Police Accountability Project [notes the significant risks](#) that arise from Tasers "when used on vulnerable groups or in particular ways." By giving police such devices, the likelihood of their use, "rather than negotiation, containment, retreat and de-escalation" increases.

Peter Cotter, NSW Police Force Assistant Commissioner, [tried to justify the actions](#) of the officer in question. "At the time [Nowland] was tasered she was approaching the police." Was it at breakneck speed? No. "It is fair to say at a slow pace." This dementia-suffering terror was also using a walking frame, bound to strike fear in any law enforcement figure. "But she had a knife," insisted Cotter, miraculously elevating the level of risk. "I can't take it any further as to what was going through anyone's mind when he used the Taser."

Other details were offered. Two officers, after being called to the address at 4.15 a.m., found Nowland with "a steak knife with a serrated edge that she had obtained from the kitchen area of the nursing home a couple of hours earlier." Negotiations followed - as if Nowland's state warranted a lengthy conference with paramedics and the police. She duly "approached the doorway where the police were at that stage, and the officer, the one officer, discharged the Taser." Nowland fell to the floor. Hit her head. Lost consciousness. "The injury that she suffered as a result of hitting her head on the floor has rendered her bedridden at the moment," stated Cotter.

The result of this incident means that Nowland, despite her critical state, is facing a round-robin, rotational vigil mounted by her own family: eight children and an enormous brood of grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Whether this improves her safety, or health, remains to be seen.

A local community advocate, Andrew Thaler, [holds little hope](#) for her recovery. "I don't think there's going to be a recovery. Tasers take out bulls and fully grown men. She's a slip of a woman."

A number of conversations have been generated by the incident, mostly avoiding the reality of Tasers. There is much chat about dementia and the need for better understanding. "It is not just about memory," says one touted expert on the ABC news network. "We need people to understand that our brains are slowing down." And not just dementia sufferers.

It would be useful if such an understanding would extend to the police. But these recruits are not exactly renowned for their intelligence, emotional or otherwise. Cotter is adamant that the video and audio coverage of the incident, captured by the body cameras of the two police, would not be released. It was "confronting" and "not in the public interest" which, in Australian institutional terms, tends to mean that disclosure should take place.

While the US National Rifle Association has little logical to say about gun violence, namely in insisting that more guns, not fewer, is the answer, one repurposed bit of advice may be useful. Give the elderly, doomed to their carceral fate in nursing homes, Tasers.

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