

Australian police Taser 95-year-old woman at nursing home

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A 95-year-old woman is in a critical condition at Cooma District Hospital in southern New South Wales (NSW) after being tasered by police at her aged care facility. Her family told reporters they fear she will not survive.

Staff at the Yallambee Lodge nursing home requested assistance from emergency services after dementia sufferer Clare Nowland was found holding a steak knife from the facility's kitchen shortly after 4 a.m. on Wednesday.

At a press conference yesterday, Assistant Police Commissioner Peter Cotter revealed that the 157-centimetre, 43-kilogram, woman was alone in a small treatment room at the home when paramedics and police arrived. Cotter said that police officers attempted to “negotiate” with Nowland “for a number of minutes,” but were unable to persuade the frail and confused woman to drop the knife.

Nowland then began walking towards the doorway of the room, Cotter said: “She was approaching police, but, it is fair to say, at a slow pace. She had a walking frame. But she had a knife.”

One of the two police officers present, a senior constable, discharged his Taser, causing Nowland to fall to the ground. She suffered a fractured skull and bleeding in her brain.

The brutal incident and the press conference have provoked substantial shock and anger online. Commenters on social media have denounced the “callous” attitude of those at the top level of NSW Police to the “disgusting,” “cowardly” and “thuggish” act.

The officer, who has 12 years of police experience, has been relieved of duty and the incident is being looked into by the homicide squad. In other words, the NSW Police Force will be allowed to investigate itself.

While this will supposedly be subject to “independent review,” any investigation will be a whitewash. Decades of inequests, inquiries and royal commissions into police violence and killings have done nothing to change the situation.

While posturing about the need for “transparency,” NSW Police has sought to obfuscate and downplay the horrific actions of the senior constable. A press release published on

Wednesday afternoon merely noted that “an elderly woman sustained injuries during an interaction with police.”

The incident was captured on cameras worn by both police officers who were in attendance, but NSW Police has refused to release the footage, claiming it is not in the public interest.

Cotter’s press conference amounted to an astonishing attempt to defend the indefensible, an entirely unwarranted violent act by a police officer against an elderly woman. Defending police use of Tasers, he insisted they are “there as a piece of equipment to defend yourself... where you have a genuine fear and threat of being physically overpowered.”

But Wednesday’s incident is in fact a clear demonstration that this “self-defence” justification is completely false. No one could reasonably conclude that a 95-year-old woman with a walking frame could “physically overpower” a police officer.

Deakin University criminologist Emma Ryan dismissed the conception that the senior police constable did not understand the likely consequences of using the dangerous high-voltage weapon against a 95-year-old woman. She told the *Sydney Morning Herald*, “It’s very well known that you don’t Taser frail, elderly or small-statured people, or people with potential heart conditions.”

Tasers were introduced to the NSW Police in 2002, as a supposedly “non-lethal” alternative to firearms. Police are not using these new weapons instead of guns, but in addition. The overall “use of force” is becoming more common, with the availability of Tasers, pepper spray and other “non-lethal” options helping to normalise the use of weapons by police.

NSW Police figures obtained by Greens MP David Shoebridge in 2011 showed that the brandishing of Tasers increased from almost never in 2008–2009 to more than 1,000 occasions in 2010–2011, while the drawing of guns remained steady at around 750 incidences. In other words, weapons were produced by police officers more than twice as frequently in 2010 as was the case two years earlier.

Information about the use of Tasers is closely guarded by

the NSW Police Force. The most recent data available show that, in the five years to 2018, officers drew their Tasers on 3,000 occasions—almost 12 times a week. One third of those incidents involved a person with mental health issues.

Notably, this period followed the “reckless and excessive” police assault on 21-year-old Brazilian student Roberto Curti in 2012, who died after being held down and tasered 14 times by police. Curti had stolen a packet of biscuits from a convenience store.

Police procedures on the use of Tasers were supposedly tightened in response to a public outcry over Curti’s death. But since then, at least four more people have died after being tasered by NSW police, according to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, including Jack Kokaua, a 30-year-old mentally-ill man with a heart condition.

The most vulnerable and oppressed layers in society are massively over-represented among the targets of this increasingly aggressive policing, including people suffering mental illness, drug and alcohol addiction and homelessness, as well as the Aboriginal population. This underscores that police violence is not primarily motivated by race, but by class.

The horrific incident on Wednesday also points to the dire conditions in aged care. The Yallambee Lodge, run by the Snowy Monaro Regional Council, advertises 24/7 registered nursing and the capacity to cater to residents with “higher needs.” Yet, clearly, the staff on duty in the early hours of Wednesday morning did not have sufficient training, experience and resources to deal with a frail patient suffering from dementia.

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, more than 400,000 Australians suffer from dementia and more than two-thirds of aged care residents have “moderate to severe cognitive impairment.” Dementia is the second most common cause of death in Australia and the most common cause among women.

Aged care workers earn an average of just \$24 per hour, barely more than minimum wage. The sector is chronically understaffed and relies heavily on “personal care workers,” who have minimal training but are called upon to provide care for residents with complicated needs like dementia.

This situation is the product of decades of funding cuts by Labor and Liberal-National governments and the almost total privatisation of aged care. This could not have been carried out without the total collaboration of the union apparatus, which has enforced the dire conditions and shut down any opposition by workers.

This is being continued by the current federal Labor government. While a 15-percent nominal pay rise for aged care workers contained in the recent budget was announced with much fanfare, it does not even begin to make up for

years of real wage cuts, nor keep pace with the soaring cost of living.

Beyond this meagre measure, new funding for aged care in the budget is virtually non-existent. Just \$309.9 million will be added to the \$3.9 billion over five years announced in the October budget, well short of the estimated \$10–20 billion annual increase needed to implement the recommendations of the 2021 Royal Commission into the aged care crisis.

The police assault on Clare Nowland is an especially stark expression of the attitude of the capitalist state towards the elderly. The ruling class, in every country, has wilfully allowed COVID-19 to propagate, killing millions, particularly among the elderly.

In Australia, more than 5,400 aged care residents have died from COVID-19, and almost 90 percent of the 20,660 total deaths from the virus were among people aged 70 or older.

It was the class interests of those responsible for this social murder that the Cooma police officer was serving when he tasered Nowland on Wednesday morning. This, along with every other act of police violence, exposes the fraudulent character of claims that the police and other arms of the capitalist state exist to help the population. In fact, the police force is an outfit that is trained to brutalise.

In Australia and globally, skyrocketing living costs and falling wages are producing a sharp increase in inequality and rising social tension. Under these conditions the role of the police as a paramilitary tool of class oppression will only increase.

The ongoing pandemic, the slashing of social spending and the escalating violence of police against the most vulnerable layers of society are all symptoms of a political and economic system that is fundamentally incompatible with the needs of ordinary people.



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