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MAKING A DIFFERENCE...DAILY

Police trained to deal with disturbed people: Expert

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ST. CATHARINES -- The Niagara Regional Police Service has a good policy when it comes to dealing with emotionally disturbed persons, says an expert who was called to give his opinion at a coroner's inquest looking into the death of Orlando Rotolo.

The policy, which is covered in a general order, was reviewed by Gary Ellis, who testified Monday in a St. Catharines courtroom where an inquest is being held in front of Dr. David Eden. The inquest is looking into the circumstances surrounding Rotolo's death.

The 29-year-old Oakville resident died July 25, 2007, following an altercation with a number of police officers near a parking lot on Bender Hill near Casino Niagara.

Rotolo, who was about six-feet tall and weighed more than 300 pounds, died of acute cocaine toxicity. Police had to use three sets of handcuffs while trying to get him under control.

Ellis testified about general policy and best practices when dealing with volatile situations, and not about the facts relating to the Rotolo inquest.

Ellis, a 30-year veteran of the Toronto Police Service, who started as a constable and worked his way up to superintendent until his retirement in 2007, also owns a consulting business and has written training manuals as well as policies and procedures dealing with a vast array of subjects.

He has a PhD in educational leadership from the University of Toronto and a MA from Royal Roads University in British Columbia in leadership and training.

Ellis talked specifically about people who might be going through a crisis and are experiencing something called "excited delirium," where they might not be able to respond to any questions put to them.

"Excited delirium is a scary business because people have super human strength and it can be very dangerous for the officer, or they could be dangerous to themselves," said Ellis. "They can go from having super human strength to being dead."

Police, he said, need to be careful when approaching someone in this condition because things can escalate within seconds.

Safety must come first, said Ellis, because if the officer is taken out of the situation, others cannot be helped.

While each case has its own set of circumstances, containment is sometimes better than restraint because it gives the individual space and some freedom of movement. However, there are times when police have to act quickly to get a situation under control, he said.

"Exhaustion is very quick if in a violent struggle," said Ellis, adding police are then taught to "step it up" with other equipment they might have available.

He said some police officers might never encounter someone with excited delirium, but it's important for them to know some of the signs so they will know to call Emergency Medical Services.

Ellis said police are often called to deal with a variety of people in society. Use of force is required in certain situations, but once a situation is brought under control, an officer must also remember getting someone help when required.

The inquest also heard from NRP Det. Const. Cathy Uskin, who said some of the courses that officers can take include one that deals with crisis intervention training.

One of the challenges police services face, she said, is making these courses available to officers while making sure they have enough officers on the road to answer calls.

One course lasts four days and officers get to hear from a number of speakers who have specialized knowledge in their fields.

Uskin said the more information they can get out to officers, the better it is for all concerned.

The inquest continues on Tuesday.