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A repelling thought

CS gas has rapists thinking twice

By Marian Green
Of the Emerald

In the sixties, National Guardsmen sprayed it to deter student radicals. Now, tear gas is making a comeback on college campuses.

But rebel-wary officials aren't squirting the gas anymore. Students — mostly women — are arming themselves with tiny canisters of the gas for protection against would-be muggers or rapists.

Tear gas — or CS gas as it is known in chemistry departments — is carried by 10-15 percent of the University population, says Sgt. Rick Allison, of the Eugene Police Department.

"It's becoming a lot more prevalent," Allison says. "I see a lot of girls who carry it, which I think is just great. If only one person could prevent a rape through its use, then it certainly is worthwhile."

Allison pays little heed to suggestions that the gas can be used against its carrier.

"If the assailant takes away the gas and squirts it in the woman's face, it would be very uncomfortable, but he still couldn't get close enough to rape her anyway."

When sprayed with the gas, attackers experience blindness, nausea, dizziness and suffocation for 30 minutes and longer depending on the brand.

On occasion a Eugene patrol car gets exposed to the gas overnight, and "sometimes you can't even drive it the next day, it's so strong," Allison says.

But the gas is safe when used correctly, Allison says.

"There's never been a case — to my knowledge — of anyone receiving a permanent injury from using CS gas," he says.

Lane County Sheriff Dave Burks says the devices can be effective when used cautiously.

"Some (tear gas brands) are actually effective, and some are psychologically important to the person who has them," Burks says.

Marcia Kraus, of the Womens' Referral Center, also says students derive psychological power by carrying the canisters.

"It gives you some kind of peace of mind," Kraus says. "Any way to give women control over their own life is OK."

Women who work late nights or who live alone feel safer if they use the devices, she says. However, she acknowledges that using tear gas against a rapist who may be armed is "sort of like fighting a big brute with a toothpick."

Burks advises training and practice in tear gas use.

Burks notes, however, that tear gas sometimes is unpredictable.

In one case, he says, a private citizen temporarily stunned an attacker and ran away, but recovering from the effects, the assailant "caught the kid and beat him so bad he



Graphic by Max DeRungs

had to have a steel plate put in his head.

"That's the bad side of it," Burks says.

His department now uses the gas as well as guns. "It's more humane than shooting someone," he says.

Margo Belden, of the Rape Crisis Network, says CS gas carriers should not rely on the canisters alone.

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your eggs in one basket."

In two out of three rape cases, Belden says, the woman knows the man and probably wouldn't spray him.

Although the network does not take a stand on tear gas use, Belden says she's talked to women who say the devices have failed.

"If it's at the bottom of your purse or pocket, it won't do any good," she says. "And if the wind is blowing or it's raining, it won't work."

She suggests that users test the canister's spray range, practice and "be prepared to use it."

Marcia Morgan, of the county crime prevention department, agrees with Belden.

"Anything you are carrying, you need to be real familiar with," Morgan says.

If an attacker does approach, "you can't say 'Just a minute, let me get into my purse,'" she says.

Morgan advises periodic testing of the canisters because CS gas has a one-year shelf life.

"A student may carry it in a backpack for two years, and then it won't work."

Brands should be chosen carefully because they vary in time required for the repercussions to take hold. "Those few seconds can be pretty critical."

The University Bookstore sells a brand called Chemshield for \$10.95 or \$12.95. The Eugene YWCA stocks a brand called Paralyzer for \$5.95 and \$7.95. Both brands come on a key ring.

Bookstore Manager Jim Williams says the store began selling the gas in response to customer requests, but the gas isn't the hottest-selling item.

Nevertheless, Williams says he carries a Chemshield canister while riding his bicycle to work because it makes him feel more "confident."

Tear gas protection may be limited, but they are more effective as rape whistles on university campuses, which typically have a high noise level.

"A whistle does not draw attention," says Allison, who suggests that students yell "fire" at the top of their voice.

Escort services, provided by fraternities and dorms, also offer assistance, but Allison says those services usually sprout up "after the media has publicized a sexual crime on campus" and don't last.

"They lose interest."