



Plastic explosive scanner developed

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A company which has developed a scanner able to detect plastic explosives wants government backing for use of the device as part of Australia's counter-terror measures in airports.

Perth-based QRSciences wants Australia to be one of the first countries to trial its advanced explosive detection scanner QXR1000.

It uses new technology called quadrupole resonance to identify a range of dangerous and difficult to detect high-explosives.

Transport Minister Warren Truss was yet to consider the introduction of the technology, primarily designed for airports and any other security check points.

But Industry Minister Ian Macfarlane has already overseen \$3.8 million in funding for QRSciences to help develop the technology.

"This is something that is going to make a huge difference not just here in Australia of course but it offers real export income and of course makes flying anywhere in the world much safer," he said on Monday.

In a deal with UK firm Rapiscan, which controls 50 per cent of x-ray scanning technology in the USA, quadrupole resonance has been combined with current x-ray technology to build the QXR1000.

QRSciences director Norman Shanks said it focused on uncovering plastic explosives.

"The main threat to civil aviation is plastic because it is easy to disguise," he said.

"It can be used in relatively small amounts and it can be concealed in a raft of areas including the lining of the suitcase itself so its very difficult to find.

"X-rays have the capability for finding the large volume explosives the more common types of explosives so this combination of technology will find the threat range of quantities which have been set by international governments."

With trials underway in Italy, the United States and Singapore, Mr Shanks said he hoped Australia also made a commitment to it.

"It would be a shame if Australia which developed this system wasn't one of the first to take advantage of it," he said.

"I have several meetings this week with the right people to take it to the next stage but it is always useful to talk to them with ministerial support.

"It's timely for this type of technology to be deployed and its appropriate that the country that invested not only money but labour and skills into developing this are one of those to first take advantage of it."

As Heathrow Airport security manager, Mr Shanks saw the consequences of the Lockerbie air disaster in 1988.

Pan Am flight 103 from Heathrow Airport en route to the US exploded over the Scottish town of Lockerbie after 450 grams of plastic explosive were detonated in the forward cargo hold, killing 270 people from 21 countries, including 11 people on the ground.

Mr Shanks said the experience could have been prevented if the technology of the QXR1000 had existed.

Lockerbie, he said, "was a huge wake up call for us and that is aside from the dramatic loss of life, not only for the people on board the aircraft but the people in Lockerbie itself where the aircraft came down."

Mr Shanks said the price to the government would be "more than tens of thousands" but was less than "millions".

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