

SA: Security expert says Australia has aviation security answers

By Nhada Larkin

ADELAIDE, Aug 13 AAP - A Perth technology company could hold the multi-million dollar solution to some of the world's aviation security problems, according to a former head of security at Heathrow Airport.

London-based Norman Shanks says QRSciences, of which he is a director, is the only company in the world with technology to detect plastic explosives in passengers' carry-on luggage.

And he's expecting orders for the technology to come flooding in, following last week's foiled international airline bombing plot.

Mr Shanks said the QR product, which detected materials often missed by conventional X-ray, had been trialled extensively in Singapore and the US.

Beijing had ordered several for use during the 2008 Olympics.

Mr Shanks said nothing currently available would detect liquid explosives, however, so new restrictions on passengers carrying liquids and gels onto planes were likely to continue indefinitely.

He said the technology to detect plastic explosives had been available for several years but governments and airlines had been reluctant to spend the money.

"It's the age-old problem: you've got a solution but, until we're told by governments that there's a problem we must address, we're not willing to spend the money," he said.

Mr Shanks was in charge of security at Heathrow when the Lockerbie air disaster occurred in 1988, killing 270 people.

He said it was frustrating that funds for improved security were only made available after disasters, or in this case near-disasters.

"We've known for a number of years that, by tightening up most of the other loopholes, eventually the terrorists would return to taking bombs in carry-on bags," he said.

"With the advent of suicide bombers after 9/11 and London last year, it was fairly predictable this would come at some stage.

"It's a pity we're reacting again instead of being pro-active when we could have been."

The QR device could detect the most difficult to find explosives, including thinly rolled plastic explosives or material broken into small pieces and dispersed through luggage.

The bombing plot uncovered last week by British authorities has resulted in tight restrictions in the UK and the US on carry-on luggage.

On flights to the US, liquid gels such as toothpaste, lip gloss, sunscreens and duty-free alcohol are banned from being taken on board by passengers.

On flights to and from the UK, passengers are allowed to take on board only essential items, including travel documents, pocket sized wallets, prescription medicines and medical items, baby food and milk which has to be tasted by the child's carer, unboxed sanitary items, and unboxed tissues, all carried in a clear plastic bag.

Mr Shanks expected that within days travellers would again be allowed to carry electronic equipment such as laptops in their carry-on luggage - coinciding with millions of dollars worth of orders for QR's products.

He said it was important for Australian airlines to remain vigilant.

It was the "perception of potential terrorists" that Australia was supporting the US in areas like the Middle East, which meant Australia was "a very high target", he said.

In response to today's news reports that passengers using false names could board domestic Qantas flights without presenting identification, Mr Shanks said it was "a major risk".

AAP njl/pe/bwl