Security experts query airport terror threat spending

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A proper cost-benefit analysis of airport security spending would show much of it was "extremely questionable", in particular forcing passengers to remove shoes and belts and endure security ''porno-scanners'', according to analysis by two global airport security experts.

Any further spending in Australia, currently at $600 million a year, would be "hard to justify" given the 98 per cent risk reduction already achieved, they argue in a new book.

"We're adding layer upon layer without any cost-benefit analysis, which is actually meant to be an Australian government requirement for regulation," said Mark Stewart, a professor of engineering at Newcastle University. "Because of one incident for instance — the 2009 'underwear bomber' — we now confiscate liquids or aerosols on planes," he added.

John Mueller, his co-author and national security expert at Ohio State University, said letting passengers pay for a security opt-out ''pre-check'', as occurs in the US, could help countries cut the cost of security spending without sacrificing effectiveness. "In the US about 30 to 40 per cent of passengers are paying $89 for five-year pre-checks," he explained.

Their book, *Are We Safe Enough?,* released in October, concluded that strengthening the cockpit doors had been far many times more effective than putting air marshals on planes, hiring ''detection officers'' at airports, or buying expensive body scanning equipment. Air passengers are 10 times more likely to be killed by a lightning strike than by terrorists, it points out. "Australian spending is not overly excessive (at least when compared to the US) but additional spending is hard to justify," they said.

Infrastructure Minister Darren Chester recently announced further measures to tighten airport security. "Airport workers, together with their vehicles and belongings, will be randomly selected for explosive-trace-detection testing and other screening when entering or working in secure airside areas at major airports," he said.

"Other measures being introduced include stronger access controls and additional security awareness training for aviation workers. Much of the rest of the world has sensibly not gone the full monty when it comes to aviation security as practised in the US," said Professor Mueller, pointing out that Australian and Denmark were spending 50 per cent per passenger less than in the US.

One airport industry insider, who declined to be named, said current spending on security, including full body scanners which allow security employees to see through passengers' clothes, were necessary.

"A successful terrorist attack inflicting $US2.5 billion in losses (based on a human life valued at around $7.5m) in the absence of aviation security measures needs to occur more than once every six years, assuming 99 per cent risk reduction, for Australian aviation security expenditures of $US400 million to be cost-effective," the book said.

Economist Saul Eslake said scrutiny of security spending had gone "entirely out the window".

"The resources which have been committed to dealing with the inflated risk of terrorism are depriving us of opportunities to address other more serious issues adversely affecting the wellbeing and lives of Australians," he said.