

Submission

To: Education, Employment and Workplace
Relations Standing Committee

From: Station Officer Dean Symmans,
WA Fire and Rescue WA (FESA)

Date: 29 th July 2011

1. I, *Dean James Symmans* , of _____ , seek to make the following written submission to the Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Standing Committee with regard to The Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment (Fair Protection for Firefighters) Bill 2011.
2. I understand that the impact of this legislation will be to introduce a presumption that if a firefighter is diagnosed with a stated cancer, after having worked for prescribed qualifying period, then the firefighter would be entitled to worker's compensation because the cancer would be treated like any other work-related illness unless the presumption could be over turned by evidence that proved some other factor caused the cancer.
3. I understand that the Bill amends legislation which covers firefighters in the ACT and Aviation firefighters.
4. I have been a firefighter for 26 years, and in 1994 I was promoted to the rank of Station Officer.

I am currently a Station Officer at Albany Fire Station and I have been based in Albany since 2000.

5. In my everyday work where I service our communities through fire fighting, road crash rescues, confined space rescues, dealing with hazardous material spills and other work I am regularly exposed to toxins and risk. I am a safe and conscientious worker and I wear protective clothing and use special safety equipment but it does not prevent me from being exposed to all toxins and some of that exposure is cumulative across my career.

6. I have been living with the experience of Leukaemia. I was first diagnosed on 29/4/2009.

I have been undergoing treatment since that time and I am still subject to monthly blood tests, 3 monthly bone marrow aspirate tests and chemotherapy treatment.

I am currently in remission. The future is not fully understood as 10 years ago my diagnosed Leukaemia (APML) was fatal within 2 weeks.

I am currently living with some of the many side effects caused by chemotherapy which may cause secondary cancers or other health issues at a later date.

7. Upon diagnosis I was given a 70% survival. Treating doctors had less than two weeks to use chemotherapy drugs to place me into remission. Stationed in Albany 400km south of Perth, I was air lifted to Perth by Royal Flying Doctor to Sir Charles Gardner Hospital where chemotherapy and intravenous drugs were initiated. My wife flew to Perth on the next available flight, at our expense.

My two sons were cared for by friends in Albany, as my family lives in Perth.

Over the next 6 months, I received 3 x monthly intravenous chemotherapy treatments in SCGH hospital. My wife and sons travelled regularly to visit me at my hospital bedside. This was obviously disruptive to family life, schooling and an expensive exercise. My wife had to reduce her hours of work and we relied heavily on friends to assist with childcare and transport.

After using over 1000 hours of accrued sick leave, I was well enough to commence light duties. I knew if I relapsed I would need a stem cell transplant and more time off work. Therefore I was trying to preserve what remaining sick leave I had owing.

Although grateful to be offered light duties, much angst was caused to myself and my wife, when I was advised by my employer to take all remaining annual leave owing. I was trying to preserve this accumulated leave in case a stem cell transplant was required.

I was fortunate that during 24 years of fire fighting service I had been very healthy and had accumulated a large amount of sick leave. Others may not be as fortunate as myself.

During my illness with leukaemia fire fighters and my Union rallied to support my family with monetary assistance to help cover the costs with travel and other expenses. I currently have to outlay for chemotherapy drugs. Upon diagnosis of Leukaemia I agreed to be part of a trial which appears to keep costs down for Chemotherapy Drugs, the many ECGs, Heart Scans, X-rays, Bone Marrow Aspirates, Blood tests etc. which I have endured. I had health insurance for my hospital stays.

Fire fighters maintained my family car and house in my absence over the initial 12 months. Albany fire fighters also travelled 400 kms to visit me in hospital. Perth fire fighters sat with me bedside whilst treatment was administered.

8. From the International studies into fire fighting, including the Le Masters study or Cincinnati study, it is obvious that fire fighting as an occupation is linked to a number of cancers - including my diagnosed Acute Promyelocytic Leukaemia or APML.

APML Leukaemia is attributed to exposure of chemicals (including Benzene) and radiation.

9. I understand that this legislation will not apply to me. If I had the benefit of this of presumptive legislation the difference to my life, my families life and my treatment would have been enormous.

To start with I would not have had the stress of being concerned of how much sick leave I had left. Fire fighters would report to me and let me know how much I had left! This is not the sort of issue a person trying to get well should have to deal with in hospital.

My fire service was intent of me using all my sick leave and annual leave, and told me when this was exhausted, I could rely on a charity fund set up by fire fighters to support my family. After 24 + years of faithful service to the community, this Bill would have removed this issue for me.

Treating doctors told me I must remember that I did not bring this disease on to myself. This form of Leukaemia is due to exposure to chemicals and radiation.

I believe that to pursue Workers Comp I must prove which incident of exposure caused my cancer. There have been many exposures in 24 + years. This was a bitter pill for me when all I wanted was my life back, be healthy and not to see anyone else having to deal with the issues I have detailed in this document.

I still have 3 months of chemotherapy treatment and another 12 months of blood tests and Bone Marrow Aspirates to endure. I do not want the added stress of expensive court procedures to prove to my employer that my profession caused my cancer.

By acknowledging that fire fighting can cause the terrible illnesses listed, this Bill will assist future fire fighters in the best possible outcome for their diagnosis by providing finance, rehabilitation and relocation into a more suitable workplace if required.

10. My personal message to you as legislators and elected politicians is:

The illnesses documented in this Bill are real.

It should not be left up to family, friends and workmates to support fire fighters and their families when they are diagnosed with work related illnesses.

Please support this Bill to recognise that fire fighters and their families need assistance when they fall ill whilst protecting their communities.

There are currently fire fighters undergoing treatment for work related illnesses.

Some will not survive as long as I have.

Supporting this Bill will support those families.

11. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any further information -

Dean Symmans

Home:

Work: