

**SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE
EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS
COMMITTEE**

**ON THE
SAFETY, REHABILITATION AND COMPENSATION
AMENDMENT
(FAIR PROTECTION FOR FIREFIGHTERS) BILL 2011**

Submission by: PAUL HENDERSON

1. My name is Paul Henderson and I am a Senior Station Officer based at Richmond. I am making this submission to the Standing Committee inquiring into this Bill because I think it is imperative that this legislation is passed.
2. I will not personally benefit from this Bill, and neither will my family. But I feel just as strongly about this as if it was going to cover me and my family.
3. I am 58 years old and have been a firefighter since September 1976. I am committed to the job and have worked hard to go through the ranks to Senior Station Officer.
4. I was diagnosed with testicular cancer in 2007. I found the lump myself through self examination and mentioned it to my doctor at a health monitoring appointment that is standard practice for the fire brigade. I was being vigilant because I knew of other firefighters that had had testicular cancer and knew the earlier it was diagnosed the better chance the person had. I was aware of the link between firefighting and testicular cancer. I understand that testicular cancer is more commonly a young man's disease, but I had known older firefighters to be diagnosed with it so I remained vigilant.
5. The treatment included surgery, radiation therapy and six courses of chemotherapy.
6. In April 2009 I was cleared to work. I went through all my accumulated sick leave. When the sick leave ran out I ended up on my personal income insurance. To make things worse when I got back to work the insurance company notified me they were going to cancel my policy outright. I challenged that and they then agreed to keep the policy alive but they will not cover me if diagnosed with any cancer. The premiums have not reduced even though the scope of cover has. I had that policy for 33 years without making a claim.
7. Now that I have used my sick leave, I am in fear that if I am injured or sick I will be using up other entitlements that were not for that purpose. It could also mean I am forced to go back to work early and suffer the consequences health wise.

8. I have no doubt that my role as a firefighter was the main contributor to the cancer. We are not scientists but we know we are being exposed to a range of toxins and gases. A house fire, a car fire, an industry fire – all of them have a cocktail of gases that we are exposed to.
9. We do what we can to minimise the risk. I would say we have state of the art gear but we can never be fully protected. Ideally we would fight fires in a fully encapsulated suit but that is not a reality – the suit has to be able to breathe so that we can sustain such high temperatures. When we take off the gear we can see moisture and soot has still managed to reach our skin. Soot can still wash out of our skin some days after a shift.
10. I could not pinpoint the fire or fires where I absorbed the carcinogenic toxins. I did attend the Coode Island explosions and know a number of firefighters that were there have since been diagnosed with cancer, and some have died.
11. I also remember attending a fire at a plastics factory where plastic car bumpers were made. I was there for many hours and would have been exposed to considerable toxins at that fire.
12. I do not believe it has to be one fire – it is the exposure over many fires. We know that in the average house fire we are exposed to range of gasses and chemicals present in the smoke when normal household furnishings and electronics burn.
13. As I said, we are not scientists. But as firefighters we have known too many of us to be diagnosed with cancer-related diseases. We have gone to too many funerals. We are a small group in terms of population yet a diagnosis of cancer is almost a common event. It is unusual for a firefighter to die at a fire or incident – it is not unusual for a firefighter to be diagnosed with cancer.
14. I have also known a number of firefighters who have been diagnosed with testicular cancer and it has been later in their career.
15. This is a serious issue and one that needs to be tackled on a range of fronts. This legislation is very important as it will recognise the heightened risk of cancer and will help the firefighters and their families that are covered by that legislation.

16. But perhaps just as importantly, once the risk is recognised, other steps may be taken to reduce that risk. For example, there is formaldehyde in chip boards that are being imported and used in construction in Australia. There needs to be strict controls on the type of products used in construction. I know there is always a business or economic argument in support of cheap imports – but it is a false economy to bring in products that will ultimately create a health hazard and could result in the death of a firefighter.

17. I respectfully ask the Standing Committee to support this legislation. It is the right thing to do.

Paul Henderson