

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: Karen Lindley

My name is Karen Lindley and I am writing to you on behalf of myself and four children regarding the Fair Protection for Firefighters Bill 2011

My husband Ross Lindley was a senior firefighter with the Melbourne Metropolitan Fire Brigade for 26 years until he was medically retired in 2010 due to his illness. It was a career that Ross felt very privileged to have and was incredibly proud of, as was I, to be a firefighters wife.

On the 30th January 2009 we were thrown into the devastating world of cancer, which to be honest had never really touched any of our lives before.

Ross had started to complain of a sore back which he sought medical advice for only to be told it was probably muscle strain and to take panadol and voltaren for the pain although he could never recall injuring his back at any time.

As time went on he sought the help of a physiotherapist as the pain only seemed to be getting worse and spreading. He felt he was losing his muscle strength. A full skeletal x-ray was performed which appeared normal.

By July 2008 Ross went to the Brigade Medical officer as the pain was getting worse and he was becoming very fatigued. Blood tests were performed but the only concern the doctor had was his blood sugar levels and his higher than normal blood pressure reading. Once again he was referred to a sports medicine physiotherapist who kept telling him it was referred pain and basically just to learn to live with it!

Ross continued having remedial massages sometimes up to three times a week and even tried acupuncture just to try and relieve the pain and discomfort. Again he visited another doctor for advice and once again told to rest and continue taking panadol and voltaren. In the end we were calling the doctors Dr. Voltaren and Dr. Panadol.

I cannot begin to tell you the amount of frustration and stress that this was causing not only to Ross, but to myself and our family when I knew with my “gut instinct” that something was terribly wrong but we could not get answers for.

It was incredibly hard to sit by and watch Ross deteriorate in physical and mental health. Sometimes he was reduced to tears simply trying to get out of bed in the morning because of the pain and muscle weakness. For someone who was so fit and strong even opening a jar of jam was becoming more difficult.

Our social life certainly suffered as well as he became more withdrawn and he just did not feel like doing anything.

In January 2009 Ross went back to the Brigade Medical Officer asking to have an MRI scan. He was told that it would cost him a lot of money. I'm sure you can imagine his reply to that!

On the 30th January 2009 an MRI scan was performed and Ross was admitted to hospital that day where we soon learnt that he had many bone lesions throughout his body but he has also had a tumour on his spine which was compressing on his spinal cord.

Just a week or two prior to his scan Ross started to have a tingling sensation down his legs and the feeling that his legs would give way on him when he walked.

Now we knew why.

We were told that it would only have been a matter of time before there was permanent damage to his spine and he would have been paralysed.

After, many scans, blood tests and bone marrow biopsies, Ross was diagnosed with Multiple Myeloma which is an incurable cancer of plasma cells that are in the bone marrow.

Myeloma develops when plasma cells undergo a cancerous change and become myeloma cells. These cells multiply and form tumours, especially in the bone marrow and on the surfaces of different bones in the body. As a result bones can become weaker, more brittle and break more easily.

Normal plasma cells produce antibodies that help protect the body from infection and disease As myeloma cells multiply they crowd the bone marrow and prevent it from making normal numbers of red cells, white cells and platelets.

The shock of his diagnosis left us all feeling very numb but it all became very real and confronting for us when he was transferred to the ward with the big oncology sign hanging from the ceiling.

The next six months was a very distressing time for us all as Ross had to endure a very gruelling and sometimes quite gruesome regime of chemotherapy leading up to a stem cell transplant to save his life. We were told that the recovery period after his transplant would take at least 18 months.

During that time we all had to deal with our emotions individually which proved much harder for some than others, but with the support of each other, our family, friends and especially our "fire brigade" family we survived the ordeal.

When Ross was diagnosed he had to use all his accumulated leave to have his treatment. Fortunately he had income protection insurance but unfortunately it only covers you for 70 percent of your income and he still had to pay income tax out of that. We still had a mortgage and everyday living expenses to cover as well as out of pocket medical expenses which soon added up. This put a huge financial strain on us as we have had to go further into debt. Financially this has put us back many years.

We made enquiries about claiming work cover but we were told that it would be very difficult to get cover as Ross would have to prove which fire or incident he attended and what type of toxic substance he was exposed to that resulted in his cancer.

After 26 years as a firefighter Ross has been exposed to an immeasurable number of toxic chemicals and fumes, the majority of them being unknown.

There were times over the years that he would come home from work wearing a yellow wristband which he had to wear for 24 hours. It was a warning band to alert medical staff in the event of illness or collapse that he had been exposed to toxic chemicals. A manifest of all the known chemicals was kept of the fire that they attended but this information was destroyed after 24 hours.

I use to worry when he came home not only when he wore the band, but at other times after fires as you could still smell the smoke and chemicals on his skin even after he had showered. Sometimes this lasted a couple of days.

I not only worried for his health, but for mine and our children.

The smoke and chemical exposure became more of a concern than actually being burnt in a fire.

As you can see after 26 years in the job it would be almost impossible to pinpoint one particular fire or incident. After a lot of reading and researching we are totally convinced that this accumulative exposure over his career has resulted in Ross's cancer.

We chose not to proceed with litigation to get cover as we felt we had a big enough fight on our hands with Ross's treatment and recovery. Fighting cancer is a deeply emotional, physical and financially draining struggle and to have to try and prove our case when there was no available evidence documented seemed insurmountable.

As a firefighters family you accept the shiftwork that is involved as part of the job but as a family you sacrifice an incredible amount of quality time together to protect the community.

This in itself can cause a lot of strain on relationships.

It's not only Christmas day or weekends but it's the other times like the school plays or family gatherings or as I was reminded by one of our sons " even the under 9's Father and Son football weekend away that dad couldn't go to because of work" that still, 15 years later is forgiven but not forgotten.

Precious moments that can never be replaced.

We only have to be reminded of the images of September 11 2001 to realize that firefighters are not just ordinary people doing their job but that they are extraordinary men and women who are trained to face danger when our most basic human instinct is to flee.

I believe firefighters do know the risks involved with their occupation but they also know that in the event of injury or even death at work that they and their family are secure in the knowledge that they will be compensated and looked after.

How can this not be the case here in Australia when they get cancer due to their job, when all of the research and studies overseas accept the link between firefighting and cancer.

How many firefighters have already died from cancer due to their job and how many more will succumb to this insidious disease.

As the law stands if my husband dies from this disease my children and I will not be compensated for the ultimate sacrifice he has paid to protect the community.

Ross continues to be treated for his cancer via monthly visits to the oncology day ward for intravenous treatment as well as taking the drug Thalidomide which both have serious side effects.

In putting my thoughts into written words I hope I have given you a small insight into the devastating affect that this has had on all of our lives.

This legislation will not benefit my family and I personally but I implore the Australian Government to accept this bill for present and future firefighters and their families to protect their future and hope that they can be relieved of at least some of the stress if they ever have to travel down that road.

Dated this 25th day of July 2011

Karen Lindley