



BULLETIN

Bulletin No: 007

1 July 2022

TO ALL UFUA MEMBERS

World Health Organization officially declares firefighting a cancer-causing profession

The World Health Organization's (WHO) International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has today officially declared firefighting as a cancer-causing profession, a move that has major implications for the manner in which cancer is managed for firefighters and fire services across the world, including Australia.

The WHO IARC announced it was escalating the profession of firefighting from 'Group 2A – Probably carcinogenic to humans' to 'Group 1 – Carcinogenic to humans' as part of its *'Monograph on the identification of carcinogenic hazards to humans'* – an ongoing detailed study of a single specialised subject or an aspect of it.

United Firefighters Union of Australia - National Secretary Greg McConville said the WHO IARC has now confirmed beyond any doubt, that the profession of firefighting causes cancer in firefighters and this has important implications for Australia's governments and fire services.

"The WHO IARC has now absolutely confirmed what firefighters and their representatives have been advocating for years – firefighting causes cancer.

"The WHO's decision to now classify the profession of firefighting as being 'carcinogenic to humans' represents an undeniable call upon all Australian governments to introduce new measures critical in protecting firefighter health.

“This includes increasing the number of cancers covered by firefighter presumptive legislation from 12 to 19 to include Thyroid, Pancreatic, Skin, Cervical, Ovarian, Penile and Lung cancer.

“With women choosing to become firefighters in ever growing numbers, it’s particularly important that we put in place measures to protect their health early, through the addition of Cervical and Ovarian cancer to presumptive legislation protecting firefighters.

“Additionally, firefighters urgently need long term health screening and therapeutic blood donations to assist in managing their exposure to a range of dangerous toxins and PFAS.

“Comprehensive health screening for all firefighters throughout their career is absolutely critical in detecting the early signs of cancer and may promote early intervention, increasing the chances of survival and cure.

“Therapeutic blood donations also offer real hope to firefighters and other members of the community who have been exposed to PFAS and retain high levels of the deadly toxin in their blood.

“The removal of PFAS from firefighter’s bodies via therapeutic blood donation (venesection) will also assist in reducing the incidence of cancer and is already supported by Medicare in cases of haemochromatosis.”

Alex Forrest, a highly decorated and experienced Captain with the Winnipeg Fire Department in Canada and Trustee of International Association of Firefighters (IAFF), who represents firefighters at the WHO IARC meetings said the IARC Monograph was vital on monitoring the impacts of firefighting on the health of firefighters themselves.

“The IARC Monograph identifies environmental factors that are carcinogenic hazards to humans. These include chemicals, complex mixtures, occupational exposures, physical agents, biological agents, diesel particulate, shiftwork and lifestyle factors.

“National health agencies, including those in Australia can use this information as scientific support for their actions to prevent exposure to potential carcinogens.

“While this historic Monograph is the tragic reality of our job, its crucially important for firefighters around the world as we now know the extent of the Occupational Cancer impact upon our profession.

“This will lead to proper recognition for this danger around the world and this will result in better prevention, technologies and compensation for the worlds firefighters.”

Mr McConville said that the message of today’s WHO IARC announcement on cancer in firefighters for Australia’s governments and fire services could not be clearer.

“While much has been achieved in the area of presumptive legislation to compensate firefighters who succumb to specific cancers, the sad reality is that due to the increasingly complex and toxic nature of the materials used to manufacture goods, buildings and vehicles, the incidence of cancer among firefighters is increasing, not decreasing.

“That simply means governments must do more to protect firefighters’ health, including the expansion of cancers covered by presumptive legislation from 12 to 19, the introduction of long-term health screening for firefighters, Government support for firefighter health studies and the approval therapeutic blood donations so that firefighters can reduce the concentrations of PFAS in their blood.

“In light of the WHO IARC’s announcement today, Australia’s firefighters urgently call on all Australian governments and fire services to take these important steps to protect firefighter health.”

Authorised by National Secretary Greg McConville