

**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:** FRANK BESANKO AFSM

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1. My name is Frank Besanko and I am a Commander in the Metropolitan Fire Brigade in Melbourne. I have been a firefighter for 33 years.
2. I am writing this submission to record my support for this Bill. I feel very strongly that cancers for firefighters should be recognised as occupational diseases. I personally will not benefit from this Bill, but that is not what concerns me. What concerns me is that we know there must be a link between firefighting and some cancers because we see it all too often. Internationally the link between firefighting and some cancers has been made. Overseas legislation has been put in place to protect the firefighter and their family should the firefighter be diagnosed with cancer. It is overdue for similar legislation to be put in place to protect Australian firefighters and their families.
3. Four years ago I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. I underwent treatment and now I am technically in remission, although I have just had a recent complication, I am regularly monitored and I remain vigilant about my health.
4. I never attempted to see work cover for the disease. It was all too hard to do so and I had heard from others it was not worth going down that path. There is no way we can pin point which fire or incident we were exposed to the toxins that have resulted in cancer. In fact there probably isn't one fire or incident – it is most likely repeated exposure to these toxins that are carcinogenic that have resulted in cancer.
5. As firefighters we do everything we can to reduce our risks. Our gear is scientifically geared to protect us from fire but in doing so we cannot be fully protected from gases and toxins.
6. We can't tell when we go to a fire what toxins we will be exposed to. Our job is to protect the community and that is what we do. We don't know what levels of toxins we are absorbing through our skins or inhaling. We are not chemists - we are firefighters. But it is known that there are a range of toxins and carcinogens in structural fires – not just factory fires but every house fire.

7. There are too many firefighters being diagnosed with cancers and too many dying. You ask any firefighter and he will tell you that he has been to too many funerals for firefighters that have died of cancer related diseases.
8. It tears your heart out to see your mate being diagnosed with cancer, go through treatment and then still die. You feel for your mate, their families, their sons and daughters. That person should be there to be a parent and it is because of their work as a firefighter that they have been lost.
9. This Bill won't stop the exposure to toxins or cancer for firefighters. But what it will do is give them some relief when they need it most. It will recognise that they have a work-related illness and get the assistance they need. There should be no distinction in terms of compensation and assistance for a firefighter who dies at a fire, or one who dies some years later with cancer. They still deserve recognition and their families deserve the same assistance.
10. I am hoping that one of the positive outcomes of this legislation is the recognition of the toxins we are exposed to, and that as a result steps are taken to reduce that exposure. As stated, we cannot fully encapsulate ourselves when fighting fires so we cannot fully protect ourselves from being exposed to toxins. But what can be done is reducing the toxins in construction and households.
11. It is shocking to me, but given everything we know about asbestos, there is still asbestos in modern manufacturing products that are being put into houses. Not only does that put the community at risk, but it certainly puts the firefighter at risk if they are called out to attend a fire at that house.
12. There needs to be strong regulatory control on the nature of building and construction products that we use in Australia. There needs to be stringent controls on what can be imported. We need to attack this problem from both sides – ensuring firefighters are well informed and take every measure to protect themselves and ensuring that we are not putting them at unnecessary risk by failing to control the type of products used in construction and residential homes.

13. Finally, I have written the following which sums it up for me:

Got a call from the Fire Services Doctor Barry Gilbert....this  
bristled the hairs at the back of my neck  
Come and see me Frank, we need to discuss an important  
health issue, it'll only take a sec.  
You are unlucky.....you may have cancer...it could be bad  
I tell Maria & daughters Danielle & Emily...tears, hugs & kisses  
you'll be right dad.  
Specialists ask if it was WorkCover or not, I haven't a clue and  
my mind is at sea  
Through operations and tests they tell me, I've got the Big "C"  
Like a punch in the guts I have this hollow feeling,  
I'm OK now, four years on I've been fixed up,  
But my thoughts are with Ghostly Brothers & Sisters that did not  
survive and their families that are still reeling.