

SUBMISSION

TO THE SENATE EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND

WORPLACE RELATIONS COMMITTEE

ON THE

SAFETY, REHABILITATION AND COMPENSATION

AMENDMENT

(FAIR PROTECTION FOR FIREFIGHTERS) BILL 2011

1. My full name is Phillip Andrew Wigg and I was a firefighter for 24 years before I was pensioned out due to brain cancer.
2. I personally will not benefit from the Bill being considered. But I feel very strongly about this issue and that families should be protected when a firefighter contracts cancer as a result of firefighting.
3. I entered the fire service in September 1985. I was employed by the Metropolitan Fire Brigade in Victoria for my entire service.
4. In February 2006 I was diagnosed with an inoperable, malignant, brain tumor. I had developed epilepsy and later collapsed. At the time I was diagnosed the prognosis was that I would have one to five years to live.
5. I have had radiotherapy and the tumor appears to have stabilised, but I am closely monitored. I have a MRI scan every three months. Every three months I don't know what news I am going to get.
6. Brain cancer has completely changed my life.

7. Initially I wanted to keep working so I worked at the training college. I can't drive because of the epilepsy so had to rely on another firefighter to drive me to and from work. After a couple of years we could not keep that up. It is a lot to expect someone to transport you around all the time.
8. It is also difficult to work when coping with the symptoms of brain cancer. I am fatigued and suffer memory loss. At times my speech is affected. I know what I want to say but it can be difficult to find the words. Sometimes even when I find the words they just come out wrong. It is frustrating and embarrassing.
9. In May 2009 I was medically retired and am now on a disability pension. It is not an easy life. It has taken its toll on my family and my marriage has not survived.
10. The prognosis is still uncertain. I have a daughter who is 21 years old in December and my son is 18 in September. It is hard on them as the future is so uncertain.
11. I have no doubt that I contracted this cancer as a result of being exposed to toxins while firefighting. There is no other reason for it. I was a fit and healthy man. I looked after my health and fitness.
12. We don't think about the toxins and chemicals we are exposed to when we go into a fire. The adrenalin just kicks in and you want to do your job. You don't think that a burning home is a chemical death trap.
13. We take all known precautions. We wear protective clothing which meets international standards. We wear breathing apparatus. But we are still exposed. It is obvious we are not fully protected because there is soot on our skin when we take off the protective gear.
14. I can't tell you which specific fires I was exposed to the toxins. I can tell you that I have been to many and that it is known that even the average house fire has a number of chemicals being released in combustion.
15. I did go to Coode Island and I know a number of firefighters that did have been diagnosed with cancer and other illnesses.

16. Since I was diagnosed with brain cancer, I have learned of a number of other firefighters who have had brain cancer. It was surprising to me to know that it is not uncommon. Again, it is not something we think about. We just go and do our job.
17. I am very distressed that I may not survive and my family will not be provided for. At the time I was diagnosed I did seek legal advice about seeking compensation and cover. I was advised that it would be difficult to succeed. Because of the symptoms I was experiencing I was not physically able to pursue a legal case. Also I could not see the point in spending precious money in a legal fight that was going to be difficult and lengthy and probably not going to result in cover. It was obvious to me that I had brain cancer because of firefighting. I understand that there are many studies that support that. What I don't understand is why it should be so hard to get cover and compensation.
18. As I said I will not benefit from this Bill. I wish I did because I want my family looked after.
19. I ask this committee to listen to the firefighters when they tell their stories and their fight with cancer. I ask you to understand that the nature of firefighting is dangerous and one of the hidden dangers is the exposure to the toxins. There are too many of us with similar cancers for there not to be a link. We were very fit and healthy – we had to be to get into the fire service. We maintained our health and fitness – we had to, to do our jobs and so our crews could rely upon us. Yet too many of us are struck down with the same cancers.
20. Please support this legislation. The families of firefighters should be protected and looked after when it is the job that kills the firefighter.

Phillip Wigg