

FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE MATTERS

A PARLIAMENTARY BULLETIN FOR MPS FROM THE FIRE BRIGADES UNION | JANUARY 2023



FIREFIGHTERS DEMAND ACTION ON OCCUPATIONAL CANCERS

Ground breaking independent research conducted by the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) and commissioned by the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) has found that toxic contaminants in fires are directly linked to increased rates of cancer among firefighters.

More than 4% of surveyed firefighters were found to have a cancer diagnosis. Instances of cancer among firefighters aged 35-39 were up to 323% higher than the general population in the same age category.

EVIDENCE

The FBU commissioned the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) to conduct the UK Firefighter Contamination Survey, in order to provide an evidence base for understanding the risks and common sources of contaminant exposure, informing decontamination and future research recommendations.

The research is based on a survey of almost 11,000 firefighters across the UK, representing nearly a quarter (24%) of the UK's total firefighter workforce – the largest study of its kind in the UK. The research in question has been published in the internationally peer reviewed journals.

Wolffe, T.A.M., Robinson, A., Dickens, K. et al. Cancer incidence amongst UK firefighters. Sci Rep 12, 22072 (2022).

SCOTLAND RESEARCH

UCLan researchers were able to go further with their findings in Scotland, comparing firefighter cancers to the general population using Scottish mortality data.

They found that Scottish male firefighters have 1.6 times higher cancer mortality overall, compared to the public. Scottish firefighters die from cancers at a younger age: 45-49 compared to the general population (65-69 years old). The majority of firefighters are diagnosed with rare cancers too late (at the terminal stage) with lower chances of recovery. Firefighters have higher mortality rates for certain cancers:

This research has significant implications for firefighters across the UK, who have similar procedures, equipment and PPE and therefore face almost identical risks.

A A Stec, A Robinson, T A M Wolffe, E Bagkeris, Scottish Firefighters Occupational Cancer and Disease Mortality Rates: 2000-2020, Occupational Medicine, 2023; kqac138

Types of cancer	Mortality rate
Unknown origin	6 x higher
Prostate	3.8 x
Leukaemia	3.2 x
Without specification of the site	2.7 x
Oesophagus	2.4 x
Urinary system	1.9 x

INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION

On 1 July 2022, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) declared that occupational exposure as a firefighter has been classified as carcinogenic (a preventable cause of human cancer).

IARC, a World Health Organization (WHO) body, report that positive associations were observed for mesothelioma and cancers of the bladder, colon, prostate, and testis, and for melanoma and non-Hodgkin lymphoma. As a result, it was announced on 1 July that occupational exposure as a firefighter was classified as “carcinogenic to humans” on the basis of “sufficient” evidence for cancer in humans (Class 1). This classification applies to all types of firefighters, and also to both men and women. The USA, Canada, Australia and Poland already have some presumptive legislation in place for a number of cancers suffered by firefighters. In the USA about 44 states out of 50 have some presumptive legislation and cancers. The UK is now seriously out of step with the international standards and best practice.

IIAC

The Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992 states that the Secretary of State may prescribe a disease if there is a recognised risk to workers in an occupation, and the link between disease and occupation can be established or reasonably presumed in individual cases.

The Industrial Injuries Advisory Council (IIAC) is the body that advises the Secretary of State on these matters. The Council makes a probabilistic assessment, based on robust research evidence, drawn from independent studies, that work in a prescribed job or with a prescribed occupational exposure increases the risk of developing the disease by a factor of more than two.

The UCLan research adds significantly to previous literature on firefighter cancer risks, and is based on studies of UK conditions.

DECON CAMPAIGN

Beginning in 2018, the FBU commissioned research on contaminants. In November 2020, UCLan published the Interim Best Practice Report: Minimising Firefighters’ Exposure to Toxic Fire Effluents. The report was circulated to politicians, fire and rescue service organisations and media.

The latest UCLan research shows that firefighters are directly exposed to potentially large quantities of toxins on a regular basis when attending fires and that toxins are unknowingly transported back to stations and homes – further increasing firefighters’ exposure.

Firefighters risk their lives every day when they go out of the bay doors, but this risk doesn’t just stop there, it is ever present and returns home every day and long into retirement – cancer. The FBU has long suspected that fire contaminants were very likely causing cancer and other diseases in firefighters. Now, there is evidence that requires action. It is now time to demand change to make our profession safer.

The FBU wants urgent negotiations with ministers in all administrations across the UK, fire employers and chief fire officers to implement:

- Prevention measures to remove contamination at source
- Regular health monitoring so lives can be saved
- Enforcement of the decontamination policies
- National records for the firefighters cancer incidences
- Presumptive legislation for the cancers being higher than in general population.



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