

2/26/2013

I am here today to offer testimony in favor of S.B. No. 925 - AN ACT CONCERNING WORKERS' COMPENSATION COVERAGE FOR FIREFIGHTERS AND POLICE OFFICERS. I speak before you today as a member of a department who, like too many others, has experienced a line of duty death as a result of a cardiac event during firefighting operations.

But the truth is, while the inception of a cardiac event may occur at a call or while on-duty, the symptoms of a heart attack may develop long after a firefighter has left the station. Firefighters suffer from Coronary Heart Disease at a rate disproportionate to that of the US population. According to a Harvard University study, firefighters have a 300% increased risk of developing CHD as compared to other segments of the population. CHD is responsible for 45% of on-duty deaths among United States firefighters. (source – case control study CDC)

Along with this increased risk of CHD, firefighting includes long sedentary stretches followed by irregular heavy exertion. Firefighters react immediately to alarms with significant increases in pulse rate. During fire suppression, we work at near maximal heart rates while wearing upwards of 50 pounds of protective equipment, sometimes for prolonged periods. Heat stress and fluid losses can result in decreases in cardiac output despite sustained tachycardia. Self contained breathing apparatus has reduced, but not eliminated, chemical exposures including carbon monoxide, particulates, and other toxicants. Firefighters experience intermittent noise exposure, which may increase blood pressure. (source – case control study National Center for Biotechnology Information)

In a study conducted at St. Joseph's Hospital, Principal Investigator H. Robert Superko, MD, said it best when he stated: "Imagine being awakened from a dead sleep by a loud, shrieking siren several times during the night, responding through the rush of adrenaline, carrying a hundred pounds of equipment on your back, and meeting people at the very worst possible moments in their lives every day and you can begin to understand the toll it takes on the first responders. "And, consider the emotional and psychological stress they encounter each day as they respond to society's most brutal moments from murders to car wrecks and death. Finally, those who serve as first responders have a mind-set and a desire to help people. They certainly bring a competitive nature to the job but also a profound desire to help and to do the best for others. All these elements create an environment that puts them at an increased risk for cardiac disease."

Our job is demanding, both physically and mentally. The disrupted sleep patterns and peak physical exertion take their toll in ways that only science can see. Just as many other injuries may not be immediately evident with their symptoms following the onset of injury, the damages sustained to a firefighter's heart may not display themselves until long after a firefighter has left the station. I urge you to support S.B. 925 in recognition of this.

FF. Gary Buzzell

Bristol Firefighters Local 773