

Firefighters demand greater protection from exposure to carcinogens, mutagens and reprotoxics

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Several studies show that public authorities and employers are falling short on their responsibility to sufficiently protect firefighters from the risk of exposure to carcinogens, mutagens and reprotoxics (CMRs). This means that firefighters are doubly at risk – not only from the nature of their profession itself but also from the consequences of it.

There is a major gap between the cancers recognised as occupational diseases in the various countries and the number of cancers attributable to occupational exposure. National data and EU data on cancers contains very little information on cancer patients' occupations. The European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) estimates that 8% of all cancer cases are work-related, making up 12% of cancer cases among men and 7% of cancer cases among women. Moreover, specific studies have shown that firefighters in the age category of 30-49 have a significant excess risks of prostate cancer and skin melanoma.

The EPSU firefighters' network therefore demands urgently a stronger regulatory framework and a holistic approach to addressing work-related cancers. Measures should ensure that exposure to CMRs is eliminated or reduced as far as possible, and that firefighters are sufficiently protected before, during and after incidents. Safeguarding and extending the EU's 'precautionary principle' and 'substitution principle' that are imbedded in the REACH (Registration, Evaluation and Authorisation of CHemicals) regulations is fundamental to ensuring that substances of very high concern are phased out from the market and new chemical substances do not aggravate the current situation. Governments must assume responsibility for firefighters and in addition to strengthening prevention recognise cancer among firefighters as a professional disease.

It is also necessary to ensure that governments and employers invest sufficient human and financial resources into the fire service so that occupational health and safety problems in general and work-related cancers in particular can be dealt with, including after the worker has left his/her position. While this is their responsibility, public authorities should recognise too that improving health and safety and reducing risks to cancer will make the fire service more sustainable and cost-effective.

The firefighters' network is very appreciative of the work done through the ETUI and ETUC to tackle work-related cancers, including to ensure binding occupational exposure limits (BOELs) for priority carcinogens are adopted in the Carcinogens and Mutagens Directive - MCD (2004/37/EC). Its scope should also be extended to cover reprotoxic substances. Thanks to trade union pressure the revision of the MCD became once again a priority and ideally the new Directive should become a 'living' instrument that can be more easily updated. The network will actively contribute to this work and to the work that will be developed globally to ensure the implementation of the ILO guidelines on decent work

in public emergency services (2018). Together we can build a strong Right2Health framework in Europe and beyond.

Raising awareness, collecting and exchanging comparable data and good practices can ensure that lessons learned are shared. Clear procedures must be established before during and after interventions, for example on properly cleaning clothing and equipment used in interventions. Training programmes and exercises are needed to underpin and implement in practice each stage of the procedures. Information and consultation rights, social dialogue and collective bargaining can all be used to improve decision-making on the choice, design and introduction of new technologies, equipment and/ or work organisation and work processes.