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To: All Members

Dear Brother/Sister

World Health Organisation agency declares firefighting to be a carcinogenic occupation

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), a World Health Organisation (WHO) body, has today declared that occupational exposure as a firefighter has been classified as carcinogenic (a preventable cause of human cancer).

The decision followed a week-long discussion by 25 leading scientists from eight countries in Lyon, France and comes against a background of research around the world proving that there are links between firefighting and cancer.

In the UK the FBU has led on research into the links between cancer and firefighting, as well as best practice that can help mitigate the potential risks from fire contaminants. This has included commissioning and working with UCLan on their independent research, which includes a Firefighters Cancer and Disease Registry, and using that research to produce best practice guidance and training for firefighters as well as the DECON campaign. This is the largest study of its kind ever carried out in the UK.

The report author Professor Anna Stec is a member of the IARC committee and we can be proud of the role our research played in this decision.

IARC 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 can be applied to all types of firefighters, and also to both men and women.

The IARC categorisation is a significant and alarming development for the fire sector in the UK. This is an issue which the FBU has been highlighting to employers, Chief Fire Officers, the NFCC and government ministers for some time. Sadly we have seen very little action from most. Now is the time to listen and act on what the FBU has been warning about.

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The FBU will continue our work in this area and I have today written to all ministers (or departments) with the responsibility for fire, to the NFCC and to the national employers to set out the significance of this development and the need for action.

The IARC categorisation of our occupation as carcinogenic to humans strengthens the union's call for improved decontamination procedures, regular health screening, recording of exposures and for presumptive legislation.

Sadly, the union has all too often found ourselves to be a lone voice in the campaign to do more to protect firefighters from cancer and disease. Hopefully, now those with the responsibility to act in the sector will sit up listen to our critical safety demands.

Please discuss this at your branch meetings and read all circulars. Information on the next steps of the union's campaign on this matter will be issued shortly.

Yours in unity.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Wrack'.

Matt Wrack
General Secretary

MW/sll