

media release

SA Metropolitan Fire Service
The University of Adelaide



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Landmark firefighter health study leads to improved support

Friday, 2 February 2018

The South Australian Metropolitan Fire Service (MFS), in conjunction with the University of Adelaide, has conducted a landmark study into the mental and physical health of its firefighters.

The MFS commissioned the study to gain an accurate picture of workforce health, to help it better support and manage the risks to firefighters' health from the time they're recruited through to their retirement years. The study was funded by a National Health and Medical Research Council Partnership Grant.

Director of The University of Adelaide's Centre for Traumatic Stress Studies Professor Sandy McFarlane led the ground-breaking study, the results of which will assist other Australian emergency response agencies.

In all, 578 MFS firefighters volunteered to participate in the study. This documented the life-time cumulative exposure to emergency incidents that they had attended, including those involving serious injuries, fatalities and distressed people.

The MFS will now enhance existing support systems by establishing a dedicated *Wellness and Safety Department* that unites its Employee Support and Work Health and Safety functions.

The creation of the new department is in keeping with the study's findings of a strong relationship between mental and physical health.

One of the department's first initiatives will be the implementation of Mental Health First Aid training for all personnel. This will better equip staff to identify if a colleague requires help.

Prevention of physical injury and mental health issues such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety and depression will also be a focus of the department.

The MFS has also fully funded the development of Australia's first Mental Health First Aid training film specifically designed for first responders, which will be launched nationally this month.

Background

The MFS was ahead of its time when it introduced a mental health support known as Employee Support in the mid 1980s, providing firefighters with access to support and counselling services.

The University of Adelaide study allows the MFS to enhance and tailor mental and physical health programs for firefighters and staff, with the aim of preventing mental or physical injury.

The study estimates that about 5 % of firefighters meet criteria for PTSD, with exposure to workforce trauma an inherent part of a firefighter's role. It contains a number of recommendations for the MFS to consider and implement.

The results of the study will be provided to all staff and an opportunity will be provided in the near future for firefighters and staff to learn more.

Quotes attributable to Metropolitan Fire Service (MFS) Chief Officer, Greg Crossman

I'd like to thank all firefighters who participated in this important study. It is not an easy task to look back through your career to recall and recount traumatic emergency incidents. However, their open, honest input will benefit the mental and physical wellbeing of the MFS workforce for many years to come.

Continued...

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We also anticipate that other emergency services agencies across Australia will be able to take learnings from this ground-breaking study, so the benefits will stretch beyond South Australia.

The MFS commissioned this study as we wanted to understand how to better support the mental and physical health of our people. Thank you to Professor Sandy McFarlane at the University of Adelaide and his team for their tireless work, which will help us to achieve this goal.

Quotes attributable to Director of The University of Adelaide's Centre for Traumatic Stress Studies, Professor Sandy McFarlane

This study is the first time internationally that there has been a systematic assessment, using a gold standard methodology, of mental health and wellbeing of an emergency service— a service we all rely on to keep us safe and protect our property. This approach allowed a comparison with the mental health of the Australian community and the Australian Defence Force who have similar high levels of traumatic exposures.

I commend the MFS for commissioning this report as part of a process to improve occupational health of its firefighters and other staff – it has proven to be an exemplary organisation in the approach it is taking.

The report has highlighted that there are significant mental health and wellbeing issues among firefighters stemming from the nature of their work. These affect social and family aspects of their lives as well as workplace function and need to be addressed with integrated and strategic workplace programs.

The challenge now is to optimise preventive measures so that those who volunteer their services to protect the community, are able to have a long career without adverse consequences to their mental and physical health.

Quotes attributable to SA Mental Health Commissioner, Chris Burns

The Metropolitan Fire Service's commitment to the mental health and wellbeing of its workers aligns strongly with the priorities outlined in the newly released SA Mental Health Strategic Plan 2017-2022.

I commend the MFS leadership for their focus on promotion, prevention and early intervention to support their workforce before they reach a point of crisis.

South Australians identified promotion, prevention and early intervention as priorities for building and sustaining the mental health and wellbeing of our State and it's exciting to see the MFS leadership extending this focus to not just its current workforce, but also its future and past firefighters.

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