Submission to the parliamentary inquiry into the Country Fire Authority's training college at Fiskville

by

I am happy for my submission to be published but with my name, address and contact details removed for privacy reasons.

[Signature]

March 2015
PUBLICATION OF PERSONAL DETAILS

I am happy for my submission to be published but with my name, address and contact details removed for privacy reasons.

I do not wish my personal medical history to be freely available to the general public.
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1 INTRODUCTION

1. Thank you for the opportunity to inform you of my experience with the CFA’s training centre at Fiskville.

2. In particular I would like to address the term of reference concerning “health impacts on employees, residents and visitors between 1970 and the present day”.

3. As a CFA volunteer firefighter I trained at Fiskville and subsequently developed testicular cancer.

4. Despite then dealing with the trauma of the disease and staring death in the face, I am exceedingly grateful to have survived this experience and lived to tell my story.

5. My experiences with the CFA occurred between 30 and 40 years ago and so the level of information I can recall is not detailed, in particular my memory of specific dates.

2 PERSONAL HISTORY


3 MY HISTORY WITH THE CFA

10. Inaugural junior fireman at the Fire Brigade.

11. Went on to become a CFA volunteer firefighter with the brigade at 18 years of age.

12. Continued as a CFA volunteer at the Fire Brigade for approximately 10 years.

13. Undertook training at Fiskville.
4 TRAINING AT FISKVILLE

14. Despite the many years that have passed since I trained at Fiskville, I still have memories of the training activities that were undertaken. My adrenalin was pumping at the time.

15. Attacking live fires without breathing apparatus in the following situations:

- Large earthen oil sump
- Multistorey building
- Gas cylinders with a valve discharging burning gas

16. The fires in the large earthen oil sump were ferocious and required a group of 5 men to approach the fire at close range in billowing thick acrid smoke behind 2 water fog nozzles. Participants were required to repel the radiant heat with the water fog nozzle and to keep their faces near the back of the water fog to receive breathable air. The objective was to extinguish the fire by forcing the surface oil out the back of the sump with a water jet. Nearly impossible to do so except for experienced crews.

17. A fire was lit inside the multistorey concrete building. We were required to extinguish the fire, attacking it from inside the building commencing at the ground level. Attempts were also made to attack the fire from the top of the building. Firstly without ventilating the building and then again later following the introduction of ventilation in the roof system. This enabled participants to experience the variation in the intensity of smoke when a building was ventilated and unventilated. We were also trained in how to breath in a burning building by keeping low to the floor and keeping our mouths close to the back of the water jet of the fire hose.

18. Quantities of acrid smoke were inhaled during each of the above exercises.

19. Other training exercises that I recall involved using breathing apparatus in a darkened building filled with simulated smoke as we searched for mock bodies.

5 DIAGNOSIS WITH CANCER

20. In 1978 I was diagnosed with testicular cancer. The abnormality was first detected through the rapid growth in size of my right testicle.
6 INITIAL MEDICAL TREATMENT

21. Within a week of visiting my doctor I was admitted to hospital and had the testicle surgically removed.

22. The surgery was performed by Mr at the Dandenong Hospital.

23. Under the supervision of Dr an Oncologist at Peter MacCallum Hospital, I commenced a series of x-ray treatments, targeting the abdominal area.

24. The x-ray treatments were spontaneously followed by severe nausea and vomiting for approximately 24 hours.

25. The x-ray treatments were then followed by regular check-ups with Dr.

7 INITIAL PROGNOSIS

26. Dr indicated that I had a 30% chance of surviving for 2 years.

8 DIAGNOSIS WITH SECONDARY CANCER

27. Less than a year (approx. 10 months) after my initial diagnosis, during one of my regular check-ups with blood tests and x-rays, a secondary tumour was detected on my left lung.

9 FURTHER MEDICAL TREATMENT

28. I was then referred to another doctor at Peter MacCallum Hospital. His name was Dr

29. I began a course of chemotherapy with a new drug called Cysplatinum. I was part of a pilot program for this new drug.

30. Each treatment would savage my body and result in severe vomiting for 24 hours and then gradually abate over the next 2 days. I became weak and emaciated.

31. The treatment resulted in the secondary growth in my lung reducing in size from the size of a golf ball down to the size of a marble. Continuing chemotherapy failed to reduce the size of the tumour any further.

32. It was then suggested that the growth be surgically removed.

33. This operation was performed by Dr at the Dandenong Hospital.
10 PROGNOSIS

34. Dr [redacted] was cautiously optimistic about a positive outcome of survival.

35. The new chemotherapy treatment would be considered successful if I survived for 10 years.

36. Thankfully the drug was successful and I have survived to this day.

37. I understand that the survival rates for testicular cancer have risen from around 10% up to 85% today as a result of the discovery of Cysplatinum.

11 EFFECTS OF THIS DISEASE ON MY LIFE

38. I considered myself a fit healthy young man. At a time when I had graduated as a civil engineer and had just commenced a career, my life was put on hold while I put my life in the hands of the medical staff at Peter MacCallum Hospital. I felt powerless, but was confident that I was in the hands of some of the best oncologists in the world. I couldn’t be in a better place with the disease I was suffering.

39. Advised by Dr [redacted] that the x-ray treatment may render my remaining testicle sterile. Not the news that a newly married man or his wife wants to hear.

40. My only knowledge of testicular cancer at the time was that Peter Crimmins, the champion Hawthorn rover and Captain had died of this form of cancer only a year earlier in 1976. This was front page news in Melbourne at the time. As a critically ill man he inspired the Hawthorn Football Team to win the 1976 VFL Premiership Cup. If a fit elite athlete like Peter Crimmins couldn’t survive this disease then what chance did I have? Peter Crimmins was also a patient of Dr [redacted]

41. While I tried to remain hopeful that I could survive the disease, the news of the secondary cancer in my lung was devastating. Not only for me but for my wife and our wider families.

42. As it transpired, the trauma of the experience resulted in the need for personal counselling some years later.
12 Effects On My Wife and Family

43. My wife suffered the mental trauma of her newly married husband being diagnosed with cancer.

44. Her life was put on hold for a number of years.

45. Contracting this disease resulted in my wife needing to take significant time off work to transport me to numerous tests, treatments and consultations.

46. She changed jobs in order to work closer to home to assist with my care.

47. The sickness I suffered as a result of the chemotherapy severely affected our life at a time when we both should have been enjoying the early years of our marriage. The time I spent in hospital also meant that I had used up all my sick and annual leave entitlements. This limited our ability to enjoy many of the pleasures of life that most of our friends were experiencing, like career progression and travel.

48. Dr advised us that with the extensive x-ray and chemotherapy treatments there was a possibility that we would never be able to have children.

49. The illness prevented us from planning anything long term. My wife had enrolled to undertake post-graduate studies, which were suspended. Her focus turned to looking after an ill husband, not focussing on developing her career.

50. The illness prevented me from supporting my wife in a way that a healthy husband would. This placed an enormous burden on her shoulders.

51. This would become more evident in later years when personal counselling needed to be undertaken over many years.

52. This experience changed us from being happy go-lucky honeymooners to being abruptly transformed into a concerned couple that appeared to have a bleak and short-lived future together.

53. What should have been some of the most enjoyable years of our lives was filled with anxiety and uncertainty.

54. The choice of planning for a long-term future, including the planning of a family, appeared to be taken from us. This only exacerbated the situation we found ourselves in. We were discouraged from trying to start a family for some years after the chemotherapy treatment.

55. There was also financial hardship experienced through on-going medical expenses.
13 **Effects On My Career**

56. After having only recently graduated as an engineer and then commencing my career, following my diagnosis with cancer, the consideration of undertaking post-graduate studies was the furthest thing from my mind. This was despite many of my work colleagues pursuing further studies and progressing their careers. My focus was on surviving and coming to terms with the possibility of death.

57. It was not until many years later when I had some level of confidence that I might survive, that I considered tackling post-graduate studies.

58. When faced with a high probability that you won’t survive, improving your technical knowledge for long-term career benefits just wasn’t a consideration.

59. My life was put into a holding pattern for a decade.

60. I could only truly believe that I had beaten the disease after about 20 years.

61. I eventually completed post graduate studies in Municipal Engineering and Management.

14 **My Thoughts**

62. While I am forever grateful that I survived this ordeal, I feel that I was robbed of a period of my life where I should have been at my fittest and most productive. Not battling an insidious disease that I was initially lead to believe would eventually take my life. I was exceedingly fortunate that a miracle new drug was made available to me at the time of my second bout of cancer. The majority of those that contracted the disease before me were not so lucky. As hopeful as I always tried to be, I never imagined that I would eventually get the opportunity to raise a family. Let alone live to see 60 years of age. I hope to do that later this year. A triumph.

63. I would like to sincerely thank my wife for her love and support through this period of enormous strain and emotional pain for her. She dedicated herself to my survival. Her devotion I will never forget.

64. There is a very sound reason why my life wasn’t taken. I can confidently say that I know this world is a better place for having our three beautiful (grown up) children in it. My proudest achievement.

65. For nearly 40 years I have continually questioned how I contracted this insidious life-changing disease. There had been no history of the disease in my family, nor was there any physical injury suffered that may have initiated it.

66. I trust that this inquiry may provide some answers and bring a close to the most traumatic period of my life and the lives of the loved ones that surrounded me and unconditionally supported me along the journey. Particularly through the darkest days.

67. Thank you for the opportunity to tell my story.