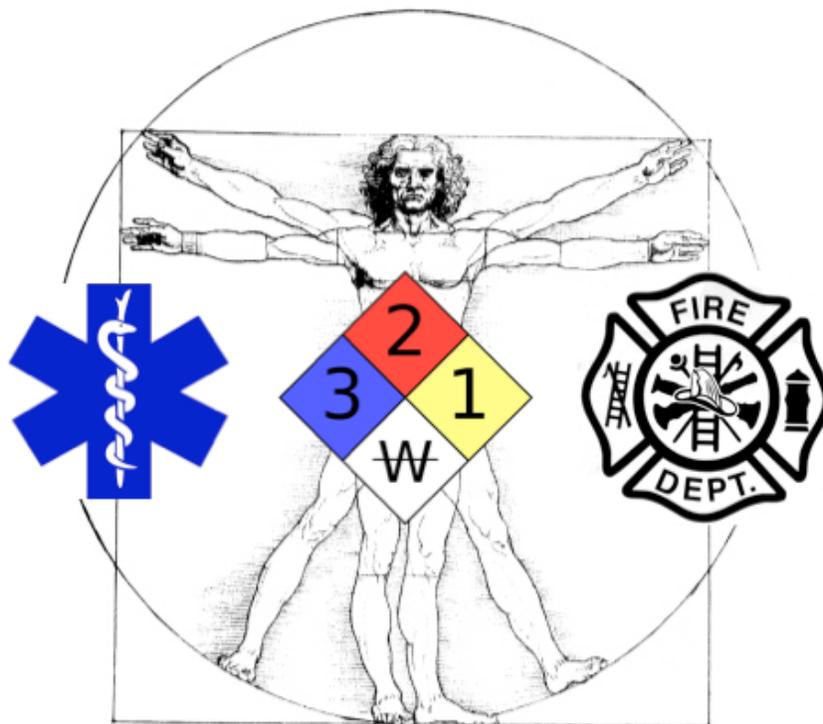

The difference between accepting risk and being risky...

A review of Firefighter safety: Rampant unsafe practices as documented in mainstream media *Original article written by:* SA Kahn et al. Journal of Burn Care and Research 2014 35(5):426-30.

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www.firefighterresearch.org

Introduction

Tens of thousands of firefighters are injured on the fireground each year even though the number of structure fires has decreased over time. One contributing factor to the severity of an injury is the presence or absence of correctly worn protective equipment. The multiple part ensemble of turnout gear and breathing apparatus are only effective if all the parts fit, are worn correctly, and used consistently on the fireground and during training evolutions.

What the study did

Researchers from the University of Rochester Medical Center and firefighters from the D.C. Firefighters Burn Foundation searched YouTube (www.youtube.com) with the term “fire fighting videos.” The first 50 videos found by the search engine showing fireground operations were reviewed by two experienced career firefighters for use of personal protective equipment and for safe behavior.

What the study reported

50% of the videos displayed unsafe practices. Four of the 25 videos showing unsafe practices were found to show unsound tactics. The other 21 videos revealed firefighters failing to properly use protective equipment. Protective equipment errors included not wearing SCBA, improperly securing SCBA, not wearing hoods, gloves, or helmets, and in two cases a firefighter approached a structure fire not wearing any PPE. Figures shown in the paper included a firefighter wearing only a turnout coat pulling smoldering window frame pieces with hand instead of a tool and a firefighter standing inches from a burning structure without SCBA and holding his helmet in his hand.

What it means for the fire service

If this selection of videos is representative of the fire service, than firefighters at half of the structure fires in the United States are committing unsafe acts, most of which are noncompliance with protective equipment. This number is very different

from the 12.2% noncompliance cited in the NIOSH fatality data. Why this is occurring is not known. Every certified firefighter is taught how and when to use protective equipment. Why is there a disconnect between what we are trained to do and how we act on the fireground?

There is a difference between accepting certain risks associated with firefighting and acting in a risky manner. How many times during recruit training did you have to put on your turnout gear and SCBA quickly, completely, and correctly? It is safe to assume that every firefighter walked away from their recruit school capable of donning their gear so not wearing gear is something we learn later in our career. The authors suggest that firefighters are constantly exposed to risk so, over time, they become desensitized and the risk doesn't appear to be a risk any longer. If firefighters are then willing to take bigger risks then a vicious cycle is created.

There is no doubt that turnout gear makes it more difficult to work but wearing it on the fireground and during training evolutions it is not optional. Correctly wearing protective equipment can be the difference between going home safely and getting hurt; or between getting hurt and getting killed. There clearly are limitations to this study but it should serve as a wake-up call for the fire service. Is your department operating safely? Chiefs, line officers, and safety officers should set a good example by wearing their gear and wearing their gear correctly on every call and training evolution and constantly noticing when gear has been omitted by others. Most importantly, we need to stop being our own enemy, take personal responsibility, and wear the gear we have been provided to help ensure we go home safely at the end of every call.

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