



Paramedic Association of Manitoba

Submission to

Standing Committee on Social and Economic Development

**Bill 35 - THE WORKERS COMPENSATION AMENDMENT ACT
(PRESUMPTION RE POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS
DISORDER AND OTHER AMENDMENTS)**

June 18, 2015

It is my pleasure, as the Administrative Director of the Paramedic Association of Manitoba, to address the Social and Economic Development Committee on the subject of Bill 35, THE WORKERS COMPENSATION AMENDMENT ACT (PRESUMPTION RE POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER AND OTHER AMENDMENTS). Earlier this month, when Premier Selinger and the Honourable Erna Braun declared the Government's intent to introduce very broad presumptive legislation for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, we applauded the announcement. Today, as we meet to discuss Bill 35, we once again congratulate the Government for moving to recognize and support the many Manitobans, from all walks of life, who suffer from this occupational disease.

The Paramedic Association of Manitoba (PAM) is a voluntary membership professional association for licensed Emergency Medical Services (EMS) practitioners throughout the province. With over 1500 members, PAM represents nearly 80% of the province's 1949 licensed paramedics working in urban and rural communities, on the ground and in the air, all across Manitoba. We strive to promote excellence in pre-hospital emergency health care and within our profession. The mission statement for the Paramedic Association of Manitoba defines the organization as a professional association committed *"to protect the public by promoting excellence in paramedical care and encouraging the highest ethical standard"*.

According to a 2014 survey conducted by our national parent organization, the Paramedic Association of Canada (PAC), with the assistance of Abacus Data, 73% of Manitoba paramedics have identified a personal need for psychological support following a critical incident they experienced, and 68% identified the same need resulting from the cumulative effect of incidents experienced throughout their career. The Paramedic Association of Manitoba continues to work with PAC on a national mental wellness strategy, and most recently discussed a series of mental health recommendations with Members of the

Legislative Assembly during our annual visit to the legislature in May. This is an area of great interest and concern to our profession.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and the very serious consequences that can accompany this issue, has received significant attention in recent years. We're pleased to know that PTSD is a priority for our provincial legislators. Amending the Workers Compensation Board Act to recognize PTSD as a presumptive injury will help reduce the anxiety that PTSD victims experience. It's a significant step forward, and together with developing a supportive environment including appropriate education and an emphasis on timely treatment and rehabilitation programs, it validates PTSD as a real and complex problem and helps reduce the stigma attached to this illness.

Between April 29th and December 31st, 2014, 27 Canadian first responders suffering with PTSD died by suicide. Already in 2015, 15 of our first responders have taken their own lives. The importance of protecting the physical and mental health of our emergency service personnel has never been more evident. Ensuring workers from all walks of life have access to compensation coverage and treatment for PTSD as soon as possible is crucial in order to successfully resolve their symptoms. The proposed amendments to the WCB Act can improve timely access to benefits and treatment that will be beneficial to those suffering mental health issues.

The advantage of presumption based on a diagnosis would seem obvious in that a medical diagnosis of PTSD leaves little room for argument against compensation and immediate professional treatment. PTSD treatment outcomes are generally more effective when appropriate care is made available soon after the trigger has occurred. PTSD presumption will undoubtedly reduce the stigma of mental health illness that currently precludes many victims from seeking help, and thus ensure better outcomes through the provision of more timely access to benefits and treatment. The disadvantage of presumption based on diagnosis

from our perspective, and based on anecdotal information from members, stems from a seemingly limited number of mental health professionals immediately available to assess and diagnose these patients soon after a critical incident or other trigger, such as cumulative exposure, has occurred. If waiting for a diagnosis takes an extended period of time, compensation and further treatment may be delayed, adding to an already tenuous situation for the client. With that in mind, we recommend additional work to ensure the availability of appropriate mental health resources to ensure early assessment, diagnosis, intervention and rehabilitation of those affected by PTSD.

The Paramedic Association of Manitoba took part in the WCB stakeholder consultation process considering presumptive coverage for PTSD. With respect to the question of retroactivity based on new presumptive legislation, recognizing this can be a bit of a slippery slope to maneuver, we did recommend that an effective date of November 20, 2014, coincidental to the Government's Throne Speech committing to "new resources for effective follow-up after a traumatic event and improved access to Workers compensation benefits". We would respectfully reiterate our position that this retroactivity be considered to assist at least a few of those workers already suffering the effects of psychological injury to be included.

In closing, we commend our provincial legislators for recognizing the need for PTSD presumptive legislation. We also urge Government to augment this very important legislation by engaging stakeholder groups to participate in the development of PTSD reduction strategies, including education and resiliency training, and ensure the availability and designation of appropriate mental health resources to assist those affected by this illness.

Thank you for your time today.

Eric Glass
Administrative Director
Paramedic Association of Manitoba