



SEPT. 11 TOXIC HEART SHOCK

By **SUSAN EDELMAN** and **HEATHER GILMORE**

Doctors tracking 9/11 rescue and recovery workers are studying whether the toxic air at the World Trade Center caused not only lung disease and possibly cancer — but also heart attacks, The Post has learned.

The death toll of the Ground Zero heroes — firefighters, cops, EMTs, construction workers, immigrant laborers and others — is climbing, and a growing number are dying of heart attacks and cardiovascular disease.

Researchers who have studied Ground Zero air samples — initially called "safe" by the EPA — are not surprised at illnesses surfacing in many who worked without respirators or safety suits at the hugely hazardous site.

"These people have been screwed," said Thomas Cahill, a scientist at the University of California-Davis who has studied the finely pulverized airborne poisons that WTC workers "inhaled deep into the lungs" for months.

"They're as much victims of 9/11 as those killed in the buildings."

Doctors monitoring 13,000 WTC workers are investigating a possible link between the heart problems and the respiratory ailments so common among the tens of thousands of Ground Zero workers and nearby residents.

"There is an increased risk of heart problems from lung disease," said Dr. Stephen Levin, of the WTC medical monitoring program at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in Manhattan.

"There is also evidence that people exposed to micro-fine particles —which was certainly the case at the World Trade Center — are at increased risk for heart disease."

Researchers will soon consult top cardiologists on possible blood tests to detect the hidden danger, Levin told The Post.

The new focus comes two weeks after James Doyle, 54, a retired transit worker from Staten Island, died of a heart attack.

Active and athletic before 9/11, Doyle developed lung disease after weeks of digging at Ground Zero and had to use an oxygen pump.

Last month, Kevin Lee, 31, a seemingly healthy NYPD cop, collapsed and died while chasing a suspect, raising questions about the effects of his many hours at Ground Zero.

And last June, Tim Keller, 41, an FDNY emergency medical technician and father of four, died of a heart attack after going on disability for post-9/11 asthma, bronchitis and pulmonary emphysema.

"By the end, he couldn't walk two steps without taking a breath," said his son David, 19.

"One day, he just went — his lungs stopped pumping enough blood into his heart."

Doctors told the family Keller's death was "directly related to his days of search and rescue down at Ground

Zero," the son said.

David Worby, a lawyer representing 6,000 WTC workers in a class-action lawsuit, said about six men in their 30s or 40s with no family history of coronary disease have died of heart attacks so far.

"Hundreds more will die prematurely," he predicted. "This is scratching the surface of all the diseases linked to these toxic exposures that people must be tested for and treated."

So far, at least 24 of the 6,000 workers have died from inhaling, ingesting or absorbing WTC dust and fumes — rife with thousands of pounds of pulverized mercury, lead, asbestos, dioxin, benzene, cadmium and PCBs, the suit argues.

The dead include men in their 30s, 40s and 50s from cancers of the esophagus, throat, pancreas, and kidney, Worby said.

Such cancers normally take years longer to develop, but Worby contends they struck sooner because of a "synergistic effect" of the deadly toxins — a theory Levin said is under study.

Others have died or suffer from lymphoma and leukemia — blood cancers that can develop several years after exposure to toxins.

After working 12-hour days for three months, digging for body parts and doing security at Ground Zero, NYPD detective Ernie Vallebuona, 40, is fighting lymphoma.

Since a recurrence, he has undergone a second round of chemotherapy and blood stem-cell transplants — and will learn this week whether it worked.

Weakness and fatigue after 9/11 — "I couldn't pull my kids in a wagon to the beach" — led doctors to discover a large mass in his abdomen.

The disabled vice cop, bald from the treatment and on many medications, is so vulnerable to deadly infection he can't eat out or play with his two sons.

He couldn't root for them at the recent Boy Scout Pinewood Derby because of the crowd.

"It breaks my heart," Vallebuona said. "I'm just holed up in the house. I feel like such a lump."

Fellow detective Rich Volpe, 38, "spit up blood and black stuff from my lungs for months" during 12-hour shifts at Ground Zero and the Fresh Kills landfill.

Volpe was diagnosed with kidney disease in 2002, and has lost 50 percent of function in both kidneys.

He will eventually need a transplant to survive. Doctors have told the bachelor he may never have kids.

Speaking between loud gasps and coughs, ironworker John Sferazo, 50, recalled inhaling "green gases" bubbling up from Ground Zero for 30 days after the terror attacks.

"There were times I couldn't wear any type of respiratory protection because the air was so bad you had to inhale whatever you could to try and pull some oxygen out of it," he said

Sferazo, a father of three, has lost a third of his lung capacity. Last week he attended the funeral of a fellow Local 361 worker and Ground Zero partner, Michael Kendrick, who died of lung cancer.

"I saw his daughter kiss his corpse goodbye. It was tragic," he said.

While "cancer is a continuing concern," among firefighters, cancer and heart attacks have not risen above normal since the terror attacks, said Dr. Kerry Kelly, the FDNY's chief medical officer. She did not give numbers.

But more than 2,000 Bravest have suffered pulmonary problems, including 500 forced to retire on disability, she said.

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Home

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