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Mount Sinai Report Shows High Rates of Breathing Difficulties and Mental Health Problems Among World Trade Center Rescue and Recovery Workers

Half of Those Examined Had Respiratory Symptoms and More Than Half Had Psychological Symptoms That Persisted Well After Their WTC Efforts Ended

(New York) – Preliminary data from screenings conducted at The Mount Sinai Medical Center show that both upper and lower respiratory problems and mental health difficulties are widespread among rescue and recovery workers who dug through the ruins of the World Trade Center in the days following its destruction in the attack of September 11, 2001.

An analysis of the screenings of 1,138 workers and volunteers who responded to the World Trade Center disaster found that nearly three-quarters of them experienced new or worsened upper respiratory problems at some point while working at Ground Zero. And half of those examined had upper and/or lower respiratory symptoms that persisted up to the time of their examinations, an average of eight months after their WTC efforts ended. In addition, more than half of the Ground Zero workers who were examined had persistent psychological symptoms.

“These preliminary findings demonstrate that large numbers of workers and volunteers suffered persistent, substantial effects on their respiratory and psychological health as a result of their efforts,” said Stephen Levin, MD, Associate Professor of Community and Preventive Medicine at Mount Sinai School of Medicine, and Co-Director of the World Trade Center Worker and Volunteer Medical Screening Program. “There is a clear need for this group of workers and volunteers to receive ongoing monitoring and treatment, and for rapid clinical response to future disaster settings.”

The findings were released in the September 10, 2004 *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (MMWR) of the federal Centers For Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which provided funding for the medical screenings. They are based on evaluation of data from 1,100 participants (91% men with a median age of 41) who voluntarily enrolled in the federally-funded national World Trade Center Worker & Volunteer Medical Screening Program, coordinated by the Mount Sinai – Irving J. Selikoff Center for Occupational & Environmental Medicine. Through August, 2004, the program provided free standardized medical assessments, clinical referrals and occupational health education to nearly 12,000 workers and volunteers exposed to environmental contaminants, psychological stressors, and physical hazards. In addition to respiratory and mental health effects, program participants also reported low back and upper or lower extremity pain, heartburn, eye irritation, and frequent headache.

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Only 21 percent of the workers and volunteers participating in the screening program, most of whom were police officers and utility and construction workers, had appropriate respiratory protection while working at Ground Zero September 11-14, 2001. During that period, exposures to WTC dust which contained pulverized cement, glass fibers, asbestos, and other airborne contaminants, were considered to be greatest.

Of the 1,138 screened workers and volunteers whose responses were analyzed for the MMWR reports, 51% percent met the pre-determined criteria for risk of mental health problems. The responses also indicated that the participants' risks for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was four (4) times the PTSD rate in the general male population.

Currently, CDC has provided \$81 million to continue medical follow-up screening for responders for an additional five years.

To provide Ground Zero workers with additional evaluation and clinical care at no cost, Mount Sinai has utilized philanthropic support to establish the World Trade Center Health Effects Treatment Program, coordinated by the Mount Sinai-Selikoff Center, an internationally respected diagnostic, treatment, and referral center for occupationally related illnesses.

For information about ongoing free medical screening examinations, WTC responders are asked to call this toll free hotline: 1-888-702-0630.