

Unintended Consequences
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By John Linstrom

Rescuers painfully find that they too are victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The events of Sept. 11, 2001, affected the world, our country, the city of New York and many of our families like nothing else in history. For me, that day marked the start of my downhill spiral from physical and emotional health to dealing with the constraints of a debilitating, chronic illness.

Prior to 9/11, I had been injured in the line of duty five times over 22 years. On each occasion I knew the incident, remembered the injury, saw what caused it and worked through the consequences.

By Sept. 10, 2001, I had been out of the active fire service for nearly two years. I had served 22 years in volunteer, paid-on-call and career departments, and had served on engines, squads and trucks for 15 years. I was a chief officer for the last nine years of my career. I had served as a division, deputy, assistant and interim fire chief in three departments. After completing my career, I maintained my membership on several federal response teams. I was a task force leader and planning officer in the Urban Search & Rescue program for the Texas Task Force 1 from 1996 to 2001. I was appointed as a technical information specialist for the Riverside (Calif.) TF-6, from 2001-2003. I also was a planner and paramedic for the Federal Region 6 Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Team — part of the National Disaster Medical System — from 1996 to 2001. I currently am commander of the Federal Region 9 DMORT, a post I have held since February 2003.

My deployment to Ground Zero in New York City was with the Riverside US&R Task force. I was assigned as a technical information specialist in the planning section of the task force. I arrived at the corner of Greenwich and Vesey in lower Manhattan on the afternoon of Sept. 12, 2001. I was confident in my training, team leadership and protective clothing. Unlike many of my colleagues, I religiously wore my mask and respirator — but to no avail. Little did we realize that the particles were so small, it was like breathing thru chicken wire. The threat at Ground Zero was both insidious and invisible. When I started to become ill in 2002, I didn't even imagine that it was directly related to the response effort in 2001. Although the towers fell in minutes, it was years before my health hit bottom. But make no mistake; both events were inextricably entwined.

During the first two years after my deployment, I developed chronic pain, chronic fatigue, vocal changes, gastric reflux, insomnia and high blood pressure. I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia and was making my way through seven different doctors. Many doctors just symptomatically treated the pain and the fatigue. I finally saw a board-certified rheumatologist who was the first to view all of my symptoms as related. I was taking lots of pain killers, muscle relaxants, anti-inflammatories and even low-dose anti-depressants in order to treat all five pain pathways in the body. My sleep patterns were erratic. I was sleeping 12 to 14 hours every day and waking up un-refreshed. When I did work, it was for two- to three-hour spurts and then I would head for a hot

shower, Jacuzzi or bed to dissipate the pain. I would wake up feeling lousy and would head back to work for another two- to three-hour attempt at productivity.

The very agency that deployed me to Ground Zero — the Federal Emergency Management Agency — denied my workers' compensation claim and refused to provide or fund any medical treatment. FEMA said there was a record that I was deployed to Ground Zero, but they "did not know for what purpose." They also stated that I "must have been a volunteer." When I produced my federal employee file and sent a copy of my paycheck for working 10 days at the World Trade Center site, I got a terse letter from the Department of Labor, on FEMA's behalf, which said, "Just because you received compensation from us, does not mean an employee-employer relationship existed at the time of the alleged exposure." The state of California, the city of Riverside and Mount Sinai Hospital all were consistent in their message: "We have no legal obligation to take care of you or offer any assistance. Furthermore, there were no toxins at Ground Zero and no one is really sick."

Hopeless outlook

To get through the day, I had to wear baseball batting gloves two sizes too small to squeeze my hands and dissipate some of the pain. On many occasions my wife fed me, as I couldn't hold a fork or spoon. We had to change the door handles in my office so that I could open them without having to use my hands. Again, I couldn't work more than two to three hours a day, and if I had to travel for business I could push myself to get through the trip — but then I would have to spend three or four straight days in bed to recover because of the constant pain and exhaustion.

Then, in 2003, my respiratory system collapsed. I had multiple bouts of pneumonia and bronchitis and developed a reactive airway disease triggered by most perfumes, cold air, dust, mold and the like. I was using my rescue inhaler 5-10 times a day, every day. By 2005, I was on 15 different medications. My pulmonary function test showed a 29% reduction in total lung capacity. I had essential hypertension, fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue, chronic laryngitis and potential vocal damage. Adding insult to injury, my private medical insurance (COBRA) was expiring and they denied renewal for one reason: I was too sick. I had to be off steroids for three years to be considered eligible for a renewed policy. Without worker's compensation and private insurance, things were getting pretty hopeless.

By 2006, I was out of options. I was living like a man in his 80s. I was disappointed in my government, as well as the insurance and health-care systems, and felt that if I didn't get some help I would be completely disabled or dead in five years. My wife and I started looking for alternative health options. We made a commitment that we would do whatever it would take to maximize the time we had together. I was finding more and more Internet data on the toxic effects of 9/11 dust — and then I hit pay dirt! I found the Townsend Letter for Physicians study on the results of 484 rescue workers from Ground Zero. The research trail led me right to Jim Woodworth, the director of the New York Rescue Workers Detoxification Project. In January, 2007, I rented an apartment in Manhattan in order to participate in the program's detoxification regimen. The day I arrived, I was on nine separate medications and I couldn't walk a flight of stairs without stopping. Cold air put me into a breathing spasm.

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Detox regimen

The program is based on a very detailed treatment regimen. Participants undergo an extensive medical exam including: history and physical, blood pressure, respiratory assessment, pulmonary function, blood work, electrocardiogram, and cognitive testing. Every participant must agree to attend the program six hours per day, seven days per week, with no exceptions. No alcohol consumption is allowed and most prescription drugs are stopped during the duration of the treatment. Every meal must include protein, and the intake of fresh and raw vegetables is increased.

The program staff makes up a package of specific vitamins for each participant that is taken during specific phases of the program. Each day, participants take a dose of niacin as they arrive at the center. The specific amount is increased based on progress through the protocol. Most participants start at 50 mg. Participants circulate their blood by walking, running or pedaling an exercise bike, based on their tolerance for exercise. As the niacin is circulated, the participant feels a flushed and itchy sensation starting at the scalp and moving down toward the trunk.

After 20-30 minutes of exercise, participants enter a dry sauna set at 170° to 180°F. While in the sauna, participants constantly drink purified water and profuse sweating occurs. Participants stay in the sauna for 20 to 30 minutes and then take a 10-minute, cool-down shower. After the shower, participants ingest salt, potassium and other mineral salts, as well as a cup of raw vegetables, and then get right back into the sauna. This process repeats four times per day. At the end of each day, pure fat — in the form of polyunsaturated oils — is ingested to give the body building blocks it needs to repair itself and to metabolize and purge the toxic fat stores. The niacin dose can be increased each succeeding day until each participant has taken between 4,500 and 5,000 mg by the end of the protocol.

During the first two days of the program, I started feeling more energy. On about the fourth day, I started sweating large volumes of paint thinner out of my forearms. I had never worked with significant amounts of paint thinner or any other solvent. The program staff asked me to think of where it might have come from. The following day I remembered that I was the lead investigator on a commercial produce factory fire in 1986. There was a collapse that buried and trapped three firefighters. I worked that scene for a week to establish the cause, in the process finding a dozen separate points of origin.

The arsonist had used paint thinner to spread the fire from one ignition point to the other. I had been exposed to that solvent 21 years earlier and it was pouring out of my body while I was in the sauna. I was completely amazed. About three days later, I started to sweat from my neck a reddish-orange substance that turned out to be mercury. On about the 12th day, I started sweating large swaths of lead from the pores in my lower back. It stained the sauna towels gray and black. This lasted for two days. The prescribed treatment continued to give me energy, stamina and an improved respiratory capability. On about the 15th day, I saw a yellowish chemical coming out of my right shoulder and back. It was silicon and sulfur from the computer-switching equipment in the Twin Towers. Finally, on about the 19th day, I discovered a bright, royal blue stain along my spine, which was determined to be manganese — probably from the metals in the structural frame of the towers. By now I was sleeping eight or nine hours every night — for the first time in 20 years. The sleep made a huge difference in

my overall healing and restoration. I was prescribed a number of natural supplements each night to enhance sleep.

I continue to use this combination of supplements to improve my quality of sleep: 1 mg of melatonin, 1,000 mg of calcium and 500 mg of magnesium, 1,500 mg of potassium gluconate and 100 mg of vitamin B1. Improving the quality of your restorative sleep is a key to getting healthy and allowing your body to heal itself.

Steady improvement

I had been having significant problems with cold air triggering asthma-like symptoms. In the High Desert region of California, "cold" was anything below 50°! Sometimes, a 41° morning would trigger respiratory spasms, which only could be resolved with an inhaler. During the first quarter of 2007, there were many bitterly cold days in New York City. Indeed, during my second and third week of treatment, I was walking a half mile to a Manhattan subway station and the temperature was below zero. Despite this, I had no episodes of breathing trouble due to the cold air once I started the treatment program. My mental capacity also seemed to improve gradually. My short-term memory improved and my ability to think and problem-solve also was enhanced. Getting off all the pain medications, anti-depressants (a less than therapeutic dosage for pain relief), angiotensins for high blood pressure and all the oral and inhaled steroids certainly played a part in the mental improvement.

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However, there were several uncomfortable facets to the detoxification process. One was drinking a calcium/magnesium supplement twice per day. That was tough on the digestive track. Another was the ingestion of cold-pressed oils at the end of every session. Walnut, peanut and safflower oils were mixed together with lecithin and each participant was required to increase the amount of oils they ingested as they progressed through the program.

These oils, along with the increased intake of fresh, raw vegetables (at every meal, for a total of two cups during the five-hour treatment) also played havoc on my digestive system. I had loose bowels for every one of my 42 days in the program. Between the extra fiber, the increased water intake and the supplements, my lower intestine got the workout of a lifetime. Program staff told us that about 80% of the toxins would be eliminated through the bowel and another 20% through the skin. I was seeing vast amounts of toxins visible to the naked eye. I knew there were clear and invisible materials being eliminated through my sweat, as well. If that only accounted for 20%, the amount of toxins being eliminated through my bowels had to be significant.

My overall health was improving gradually each and every day. By about the 40th day, I felt like I was in the best physical shape of my adult life. The contrast was remarkable. I also saw many of my peers getting well as they sweated and coughed similar materials from their bodies. One police lieutenant was coughing up dry concrete dust from the World Trade Center rubble nearly six years after he ingested it. Another had large amounts of yellow-tinged sweat leaking out of his lower legs for two days. Seeing truly is believing.

On the 42nd day, the program staff and I concurred that I was finished with the program. I had an exit interview and a post-treatment battery of medical tests. My lung capacity had increased by 1,000 ml. My blood pressure had returned to the 120/78 range. I had

not taken any medication in 42 days and I was medication-free on my last day. I was running two miles every day, with great energy and stamina. My physician told me that this was just the beginning of getting well. My body would continue to detoxify and clean itself for an additional 150 days if I were to keep up the vitamins, fresh veggies and exercise. I left Manhattan in March 2007 and returned home with a truly clean bill of health.

It is ironic, but I am thankful that my workers' compensation was denied and that the traditional health-care system failed me. It forced me to look for an alternative and, rather than being on medications and pushing around an oxygen tank in my 50s, I am in better health than when I was in my 30s.

I got on a U.S. Air Force transport on the afternoon of Sept. 11, 2001, and expected to rescue hundreds of trapped workers from a tragic fate. Circumstances and the total destruction being what it was, we rescued none. Ironically, the rescuers from every corner of America and from all walks of life actually became the third wave of victims.

The California fire service and FEMA truly turned their backs on their own — fighting our claims and denying any benefits and assistance. But the New York Rescue Workers' Detoxification Project has saved more than 1,000 lives and is continuing to restore health and quality of life to those who were impacted — regardless of their ability to pay. In my story, they are the unsung heroes from Sept. 11. My family and I will always be in their debt for what they've given back to us.

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