



NEW ZEALAND

# ACC botch mental-health claim, traumatised paramedic left to struggle for months

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5 minutes to read

Mark Belchamber sought help from ACC after developing the beginnings of PTSD as a result of his job as a paramedic. ACC failed to handle his case and are now investigating. Photo / Supplied



By: **Anna Leask**

Anna Leask is a senior crime and justice reporter for the New Zealand Herald  
anna.leask@nzherald.co.nz @AnnaLeask

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A veteran paramedic is so affected by the trauma he's attended on the front line that he fears going out at night in case he comes across people dying or wounded.

After 25 years on the job Mark Belchamber decided he needed a break and time to work on his mental health.

He sought help from ACC - but they mishandled his case, leaving him struggling and ignored for almost five months.

Only after the Herald stepped in did the compensation agency jump to action and respond to Belchamber's cries for help.

how the Taranaki dad was failed, and what changes need to be made in future to ensure others suffering in the same situation are not left out in the cold.

Belchamber, 52, has been an ambulance officer for 25 years - 21 of those as an advanced paramedic.

He has been with St John since 2005 after working for years as a paramedic for the London Ambulance.

Over the last few years his mental health has declined as a result of some of the traumatic call-outs he has attended.

"It's awful ... I love the job, I love fixing and helping people, I have genuinely stopped people from dying... but every now and again you get to a job and it will kill you," he said.

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He initially saw his doctor and thought he could cope.

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But in 2017 he sought further help and a clinical psychologist confirmed he was developing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

In September last year Belchamber made contact with ACC to explore a mental health claim.

He wanted - and needed - a break from his job.

"I'm scared to go out at night, I'm afraid I'll see someone hanging ... or body parts all over the road," he said, referring to some of the jobs that have haunted him most.

"I feel bad, I feel guilty that I'm like this - but I know I'm not right at the moment."



Mark Belchamber. Photo / Supplied



Belchamber, who has been on leave since mid-January, provided ACC with a raft of information and was happy to give them anything else they needed.

On several occasions they advised him they needed more time to assess his claim.

On February 14 a frustrated Belchamber emailed ACC to request a discussion about his case.

He did not hear from them again.

Between April and June St John also made repeated calls to ACC seeking updates on Belchamber's claim.

They also got no response.

Desperate, Belchamber contacted the Herald this week.

He said whether the claim was accepted or not, he simply wanted an answer.

"ACC has really dropped the ball," he said.

"It's pretty crap, it's not good.

"I've been fortunate ... my employer has been amazing and I have good support - but if there is someone out there in the same situation without support, and they are trying to get treatment ... it's pretty desperate.

"This is not the service we should expect from ACC."

Two hours after the Herald approached ACC for comment on Belchamber's case, a senior manager called him directly to apologise and confirm his claim was being urgently actioned.

Soon after that ACC responded to the Herald.



Mark Belchamber has been with St John since 2005. Photo / supplied "We haven't met the level of service Mark should have expected from us and we've apologised to him for the delays in investigating his claim," said a spokesman.

"Mark's claim has now been accepted for cover ... we're now in the process of working out what entitlements are owed to him."

He said a "full file review" would also be undertaken.

"We'll get that assessment underway immediately and we'll be keeping Mark informed throughout."

The spokesman said operational changes to ACC processes would be made "if there were any lessons learned" from the botch-up.

Belchamber was relieved to have movement on his case.

"What I wanted was some clarity and communication, not to be left struggling on my own - now we're moving forward, that's great," he said.

St John district operations manager Stu Cockburn acknowledged the work his frontline staff did could be "particularly demanding psychologically".

A frontline paramedic who is developing PTSD was failed by ACC when he tried to claim for mental health support. Photo / NZME

"Each person has individual psychological and wellbeing needs, and we strive to provide individual support when it is needed.

"We take the mental health of our people very seriously, and have a registered psychologist on our team to guide our mental health programmes, services and training."

If you are worried about your or someone else's mental health, the best place to get help is your GP or local mental health provider. However, if you or someone else is in danger or endangering others, call police immediately on 111.

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