

Family rage ablaze

SHANNON DEERY

THE family of a firefighter who took his own life after 15 years on the job are suing the MFB, saying his death could have been prevented.

Matthew Haar was the first of three firefighters to commit suicide between December 2015 and February 2016, sparking a major review by MFB management.

It found bullying, sexism and harassment were rife, causing mental health problems among firefighters. It also found anxiety, depression and work stress were major issues, as well as post traumatic stress.

Less than 48 hours after Mr Haar, 46, died, a colleague from his station also took his own life.

"There's a stigma in the fire brigade attached to mental health issues," Mr Haar's dad, Morris, told the *Sunday Herald Sun*.

Grieving dad blames MFB for son's suicide

"If you ask for help you're weak. There's an attitude that you have to man up. There's also a massive distrust between the management of the fire brigade and the firefighters."

Mr Haar said the MFB mental health review in the wake of his son's death, by clinical psychologist Dr Peter Cotton, had exposed serious shortcomings in the brigade.

"Since Matthew died, half a dozen people at the fire brigade have said to me, 'He was on our radar'," he said.

"Well, if he was on your bloody radar, what did you do? He's on your radar; what does that mean, you're waiting for him to bloody crash or something? It's just blown me away."

"The Cotton Report hit me for six. I had no idea. We were blown away by the shortcomings of the fire brigade.

"We really want to make sure the recommendations in that report are seriously considered and put in place."

Dr Cotton's recommendations included fitness-for-duty assessments, increased mental health training and education and "psychological post mortems" after suicides to identify risk factors. The review found the MFB was spending \$14.2 million on WorkCover claims — \$6455 per employee — more than double Victoria Police's bill per person.

Mr Haar said his son had attended countless traumatic incidents including suicides, car accidents and fatal fires. But MFB practices were insufficient to identify that he was becoming very stressed.

The father of two had twice tried to

take his life before he eventually did so. Mr Haar said Matthew had failed to cope with the accumulative stress of his job and told the MFB of his mental health issues but it had failed to ensure he was safe and cared for. He has engaged lawyers to start legal proceedings against the MFB.

Lawyer Nick Korkliniewski, from Arnold Thomas & Becker, said the family were seeking damages for the psychological reaction to Matthew's death.

"They also want to ensure this tragedy does not happen to any more families with loved ones in the Metropolitan Fire Brigade," he said. shannon.deery@news.com.au

FOR THOSE NEEDING HELP,
CONTACT LIFELINE ON 131 114



Morris Haar with a photo of son Matthew. Picture: HAMISH BLAIR