

Obituary for Advisory Board on Radiation and Worker Health's Chair

James Melius, M.D., Dr.P.H.. Dr. Melius



James M. Melius, MD, DrPH was an occupational physician and a national and international leader in occupational medicine and epidemiology. He was born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts in 1948 and died of cardiac arrest in Copake Falls, New York on January 1, 2018 at the age of 69.

Melius was the principal architect of the James Zadroga 9/11 Health and Compensation Act of 2011, the federal law that supports an extensive program of medical monitoring and health care for first responders, volunteers and survivors of the attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and the Shanksville, PA crash site of September 11, 2001. This Act also reopened the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund which has thus far provided over \$3 billion in compensation to injured and ill 9/11 responders and survivors. With his knowledge of medicine and health policy, his multiple connections to legislators and labor leaders, and an uncanny sense of political timing, Melius designed the version of the Zadroga Bill that was successfully passed by the Congress in a dramatic lame duck session in the last days of 2010 and signed into law by President Obama in January 2011. Melius worked with labor leaders across the United States, especially with the fire fighter, police and construction unions, with Senators Kirsten Gillibrand, Chuck Schumer and Hillary Clinton, and with Members of Congress Carolyn Maloney and Jerold Nadler of Manhattan and Peter King of Long Island to pass this landmark bipartisan legislation. Jon Stewart, the well-known comedian and former host of *The Daily Show*, provided an invaluable boost to Melius' work when in late December 2010 he shamed a reluctant Congress into passing the Zadroga legislation through a series of widely watched broadcasts featuring sick and injured 9/11 responders who were unable to obtain medical care.

Melius dedicated his professional life to protecting the health and safety of working men and women. From 1980 to 1987, he directed the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health's renowned Health Hazards Evaluations and Technical Assistance Branch based in Cincinnati. From 1987 to 1994, he served under Governor Mario Cuomo as Director of the Center for Environmental Health in the New York State Department of Health where he oversaw the establishment of a statewide network of Centers of Excellence in Occupational Health and Safety, the only such network in the United States, which continues to this day and formed the backbone of the medical response to 9/11. From 1994 until his death he was Administrator of the New York State Laborers' Health and Safety Trust Fund and Research Director for the Laborers' Health and Safety Fund of North America, organizations affiliated with the Laborers International Union of North America.

Melius developed a special relationship with the building and construction trades unions, and spent much of his career improving safety and health on construction sites. Until the late 1980s this industrial sector, which contains some of the most hazardous workplaces in America, had been neglected by researchers and policymakers alike. Melius helped to end that neglect by assisting the Laborers International Union to develop a unique national program that encompassed not only occupational safety and health but also health promotion activities such as smoking cessation, the first – and still the only – national worker protection program that uses health insurance premiums to support occupational safety and health. He also forged an agreement between the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and the construction industry to create the National Construction Safety and Health Research Program. In consequence of these efforts, 500 fewer workers die each year on construction sites today than in 1990.

In 1983, Melius was appointed Chairman of the Medical Advisory Board for the International Association of Fire Fighters. There he conducted research on occupationally induced hearing loss, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, asbestosis and cardiovascular disease in fire fighters and was instrumental in securing passage in many states and Canadian provinces of laws that presume cardiac deaths or cancer deaths in fire fighters to be occupationally related and therefore deserving of compensation. Melius championed the development and implementation of medical monitoring programs for first responders across North America.

At the time of his death Melius was the Chair of the Presidential Advisory Board on Radiation and Worker Health, which addresses compensation for cancers caused by ionizing radiation in workers employed in nuclear weapons facilities in the United States. In New York City, he was Chair of the Steering Committee for the World Trade Center Medical Monitoring and Treatment Program and was a founding member of the Board of Directors of 911 Health Watch. He served on multiple advisory committees to the New York State and Federal governments and to the National Academy of Sciences.

Melius was for many years a Fellow and since 2012 the Treasurer of the Collegium Ramazzini, an independent, international society in occupational and environmental health headquartered at the Castello di Bentivoglio near Bologna, Italy, that is dedicated to the protection of occupational and environmental health; the Collegium is named in honor of Bernardino Ramazzini, an Italian physician of the 17th century, considered the father of occupational and environmental medicine. In 2012, Melius was recipient of the Collegium Ramazzini's Irving J. Selikoff Memorial Award in recognition of his "lifetime's work of protecting working men and women from occupational hazards and his heroic service on behalf of the 9/11 rescue workers".

James Malcom Melius graduated from Brown University with an AB in Biology in 1970, obtained an MD degree from the University of Illinois College of Medicine in Chicago in 1974, and a DrPH degree from the University of Illinois School of Public Health in 1984. He trained clinically at Cook County Hospital in Chicago and was board certified in General Preventive Medicine and Occupational Medicine. He served for 20 years as member of the adjunct faculty of the Department of Environmental Medicine and Public Health in the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York City. He is survived by his wife, Melanie and two sons, Jeremy and Ehren.

The beneficiaries of Jim Melius' lifetime of dedication to occupational health and safety are the tens of thousands of workers across America who have been spared injury and premature death because of his work and the fire fighters, police officers, paramedics, construction workers and volunteers who participated in rescue, recovery and rebuilding operations at Ground Zero, the site of the World Trade Center, in the days, weeks and months after 9/11.

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