Thermal protective uniforms and hoods: impact of design modifications and water content on burn prevention in New York City firefighters: laboratory and field results

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Abstract
Objectives—To determine (1) the effectiveness of hoods in reducing head burns, (2) the impact of clothes worn under the protective outer uniform (modern = long sleeve shirt and long pants; modified modern = short sleeve T-shirt and short pants) on burns, and (3) whether water content (dry, damp or saturated) affects the level of thermal protection.

Setting—Fire Department of the City of New York (FDNY).

Methods—Laboratory tests (fully dressed manikin) evaluated the different uniform and water conditions when exposed to an average 24 cal/cm² heat flux, approximately 2250°F air temperature. FDNY field results compared (1) head burns during winters wearing the hood without hood and (2) upper and lower extremity burns during summers wearing traditional, modern, and modified modern uniforms.

Results—Laboratory tests showed that thermal protection was: (1) dramatically improved by the hood with protection increasing as water content increased and (2) not significantly different between modern and modified modern uniforms, regardless of water content. FDNY field results confirmed these tests showing (1) significant decreases in neck burns (by 54%), ear burns (by 60%), and head burn totals (by 46%) wearing the hood and (2) no significant differences in upper or lower extremity burns wearing modern compared with modified modern uniforms.

Conclusions—Based on combined laboratory and field results, we strongly recommend the use of modern thermal protective hoods and the modified modern uniform.

Keywords: firefighting uniforms; burn prevention; thermal injury evaluation; occupational injury

The Fire Department of the City of New York (FDNY) is the largest fire department in the United States, with over 10 000 firefighters, and one of the most active, averaging over 2500 structural fires per month. In an effort to reduce burns, FDNY reoutfitted to a modern fire protective uniform during the latter half of 1994. Modern uniform includes protective overcoat and overpants while the traditional uniform includes only overcoat. Modern uniforms also meet or exceed National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) recommendations for structural firefighting using improved thermal protective textiles that suffer little damage until temperatures far exceed that needed to decompose cotton, 250°C.

When the first year wearing FDNY’s modern uniform (1995) was compared with the last full year wearing FDNY’s traditional uniform (1993), lower extremity burns decreased by 86% (from 419 to 57) and upper extremity burns decreased by 75% (456 to 114). Risk exposure (that is, structural and serious fires) was not significantly different in 1993 (31 497 and 3806) and 1995 (30 191 and 3960). The success of the modern uniform in reducing upper and lower extremity burns served to highlight several remaining issues. First, head burns (scap, ears, face, and neck) were not similarly reduced. Head burns decreased by only 39% (from 610 in 1993 to 374 in 1995) and their numbers exceeded the total number of burns to all other anatomic locations. Second, firefighters found the modern uniform, worn over a long sleeve shirt and long pants, to be uncomfortably restrictive (especially when wet) at the elbows and knees.

In response to these issues, FDNY outfitted firefighters with thermal hoods for head protection and, given the modern uniform’s improved thermal protection to upper and lower extremities, allowed the use of short sleeve T-shirts and short pants worn underneath. The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of the thermal hood and a modified modern uniform (short sleeve shirt and short pants) on burns. Laboratory predictions and FDNY field results were analyzed. As the uniform in real firefighting situations is never dry, the impact of water content (dry, damp, saturated) was evaluated before field tests using a fully dressed, instrumented, manikin during a 12 sec exposure averaging 2.0 cal/cm²/sec at approximate air temperatures of 2250°F. Field results compared FDNY (1) head burns with and without the hood and (2) upper and lower extremity burns wearing three different uniforms: traditional (long sleeve shirt and long pants worn underneath), modern (long sleeve shirt and long pants worn underneath), and modified modern (short sleeve T-shirt and short pants worn underneath).
Methods
FDNY HEAD PROTECTION
The hood, worn by FDNY firefighters since January 1996, is made of double layer porous knit (20% polybenzimidazole (PBI), 80% Lenzing rayon) with a crown vent and bib-like design that provides coverage for scalp, ears, forehead, cheeks, chin, jaw, and neck (Total Fire Inc, Dayton, Ohio). This hood is compliant with NFPA standard #1971. As per FDNY regulations, additional protection is provided to the scalp, ears, and rear of the neck by a helmet worn with earflaps turned down and overcoat worn with collar turned up. Uncovered areas (lower forehead, eyes, nose, and mouth) are fully covered when the hood is worn over the self contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) mask.

FDNY TRADITIONAL UNIFORM
The traditional uniform used before 1995 consisted of helmet, SCBA apparatus mask and cylinder, protective overcoat, gloves, and high boots. The overcoat (model FDNY BC-1/TC-6, Morning Pride, Dayton, Ohio) consisted of outer shell made of 7.5 oz Nomex III, a Goretex moisture barrier stitched on 100% Nomex III, and inner thermal liner Aralite 100% Aramid quilt stitched 7.5 oz/sq yd. Under this uniform, FDNY firefighters wore long sleeve shirt and long pants made of flame resistant 60% polyester/40% cotton.

FDNY’S MODERN UNIFORM
The modern uniform consists of protective overcoat, overpants, gloves, and short boots. Both protective overgarments are made of the same materials consisting of an outer shell of 60% Kevlar Aramid/40% PBI, a 1.2 oz Crosstech moisture barrier laminated to 2.7 oz Nomex E-89 base and inner thermal liner 8 oz/sq yd quilted three layer E-89 fabric (FDNY Bunker Gear, Total Fire Inc, Dayton, Ohio). Overpants normally feature a level 2 kneepad (multiple layers E-89 quilt and Crosstech).

FDNY MODIFIED MODERN UNIFORM
The modified modern uniform differed from the modern uniform by substituting a work short sleeve T-shirt and work short pants (both 100% cotton) for long sleeve shirt and long pants (both flame resistant 60% polyester/40% cotton).

PYROMAN THERMAL PROTECTIVE PERFORMANCE
CLOTHING ANALYSIS SYSTEM
This system is an adult male manikin with 122 heat sensors (thermocouple embedded below the surface of an epoxy molded cone) individually calibrated to insure accurate temperature readings and calculation of surface heat flux. A computer controlled flash fire uses eight industrial propane gas torches carefully positioned and modified to create a controlled volume of fire that fully engulfs the manikin. In this study, heat flux was set at an average 2.0 cal/cm2/sec (approximate air temperature 2250°F) for a 12 second exposure simulating flashover fires. Heat flux equaled NFPA standard #1971 specifications for thermal protective performance testing and exposed the manikin to radiant and convective heat. A computerized data acquisition unit (Hewlett Packard) scanned and recorded each sensor’s temperature every 0.5 sec. Temperature readings, along with a one dimensional transient heat conduction model, were used to compute heat flux experienced at the sensor’s surface over time. The PyroMan system predicts burn injury by using Henrique’s model to translate instrument readings into human tissue damage. During PyroMan tests, FDNY’s complete modern uniform ensemble was worn as described except SCBA mask was worn without SCBA cylinder. Consistent with FDNY regulations, hood was worn over SCBA mask and helmet was worn over hood with earflaps turned down and protective overcoat collar turned up. A thermal protective performance report was generated which included burn(s) location and severity (second or third degree).

Total head burn score and individual location scores were computed based on the number of sites on the manikin’s head, assuming equal weight for all sites. To evaluate the hood, seven thermocouple instrumented areas were identified (left ear, right ear, left face, right face, front neck, rear neck, and scalp). To evaluate the uniform, 10 thermocouple instrumented areas were identified (front torso, rear torso, shoulder, scapula, upper arm, mid-arm, lower arm, upper leg, mid-leg, and lower leg). For each site, a second degree burn received two points and a third degree burn received three points.

WATER CONTENT LABORATORY TESTS
PyroMan Hood tests evaluated four conditions (none, dry, damp, or saturated hood). Damp corresponds to hood water content found after responding to a fire scene but before hose line operations. Before carrying out these tests, 18 FDNY firefighters dressed in modern uniform with hood went through simulated firefighting operations at moderate to high work intensity for an average 17 minutes. Hose lines were not charged with water so hood weight gain was due to sweat. Hood weight gain averaged 30.2 g (range 16.6 to 58.8 g) for an increase averaging 22% (range 13% to 51%). Damp condition was created by fine spraying 30 g water over the hood outer surface. Saturated condition corresponds to hood water content after firefighting (water source = body sweat and hose line). Saturation was created by a two minute immersion of the hood in water (without post-immersion blotting). For PyroMan uniform tests, it was difficult to predict extent and specific location of water absorption for each clothing layer. Thus, four conditions were tested: modern uniform dry, modern uniform saturated, modified modern uniform dry, and modified modern uniform saturated. Saturated defined as a two minute immersion of the work shirt and pants in water (without post-immersion blotting), thermal liner was fine sprayed moist to touch and outer shell sprayed dripping wet.
FDNY FIELD RESULTS
Compliance wearing the hood is greatest during the winter months and the modified modern uniform (short sleeve T-shirt and short pants) is worn during non-winter months. A computerized medical database was searched for service connected head burns during the last three winters when hoods were worn [Hood97 (12/1/96–3/31/97), Hood98 (12/1/97–3/31/98), and Hood99 (12/1/98–3/31/99)] and during the last three winters when hoods were not worn: [NoHood93 (12/1/92–3/31/93), NoHood94 (12/1/93–3/31/94), and NoHood95 (12/1/94–3/31/95)]. Head burns were analyzed according to four sublocations (scalp includes forehead, face, ears, and neck). FDNY medical computerized database was also searched for service connected upper and lower extremity burns during the summers wearing traditional (5/1/93–8/31/93), modern (5/1/95–8/31/95), and modified modern (5/1/98–8/31/98) uniforms. Burn location was further divided into six sublocations: upper leg (above knee), mid-leg (knee to above ankle), lower leg (ankle and below), upper arm (above elbow), mid-arm (elbow to above wrist), and lower arm (wrist and below).

Physicians reviewed all charts and health insurance reimbursement records to determine and verify burn location and severity. In rare cases (<10%) when burns involved more than one location, burns were classified based on location requiring greatest medical leave duration. Thus, for analytical purposes, no firefighter could have more than one burn per fire. Severity indicator was need for hospital admission. Burn depth (second or third degree) was unreliable for analysis due to subjectivity in a health care setting with numerous evaluators. During this study, FDNY fire activity records were reviewed for structural and serious fires. Interestingly, burns only occurred at serious fires. FDNY defines serious fires as an "all-hands" fire (>11 units with >55 firefighters responding) or a second or more alarm fire (>20 units with >99 firefighters responding). FDNY medical and fire databases were linked by date, location, and codes to determine distribution of burns per serious fire.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS
For each PyroMan test, significant correlations between heat flux and hood condition (none, dry, damp, or saturated) was assessed using Pearson’s correlation for continuous variables. Significant differences were assessed by Mann–Whitney U tests (non-parametric t tests). Field data (incidence of serious fires and burns by anatomic location) are presented. A Kruskal–Wallis test was used to assess the significance of differences in structural or serious fire distributions among study periods. Distribution of none, one, or two or more burns per serious fire are presented for each period studied as burns per 1000 serious fires. Burn injury per serious fire was analyzed rather than per population at risk because the distribution of serious fires varied among time periods. Numbers of firefighters remained relatively constant (11 110 in 1992, 11 433 in 1993, 11 436 in 1995, 11 315 in 1998, and 11 332 in 1999). Mantel-Haenszel $\chi^2$ test
Table 1  Distribution of head burns and rate/1000 serious fires for years with and without FDNY hood

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No hood</th>
<th>Hood</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1993 (n=1356)</td>
<td>1994 (n=1471)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scalp</td>
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<tr>
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<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>≥2 Burns</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Burns/1000 fires</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neck</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Burn</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>59</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>68</td>
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<tr>
<td>Burns/1000 fires</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>60</td>
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<tr>
<td>Face</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Burn</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>23</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Burns/1000 fires</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Head burn totals</td>
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<td>80</td>
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<tr>
<td>≥2 Burns</td>
<td>17</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>171</td>
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<td>Burns/1000 fires</td>
<td>85.6</td>
<td>116</td>
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*p<0.05 for comparison of firefighter burns/1000 serious fires wearing hoods (all three winters combined) vs not wearing hoods (all three winters combined).

FDNY FIELD RESULTS

There were significant differences in distribution of serious fires (p=0.05) occurring across winters without hoods (mean (SD) 1413 (48)) compared to with hoods (1233 (81)). There were also significant differences in distribution of serious fires (p=0.024) across summers when traditional (1263), modern (1237), and modified modern (983) uniforms were worn. To adjust for this, burns were analyzed based on rates per 1000 serious fires rather than using population based incidence rates.

During the hood study, there were 611 head burns. By anatomic location head burns consisted of neck burns (50%), face burns (24%), ear burns (19%), and scalp burns (7%). The frequency distribution of head burns per serious fire is shown in table 1. When wearing a hood was compared to not wearing a hood, there were significant decreases in the distribution of neck burns (54% decrease; p=0.0001), ear burns (60% decrease; p=0.0001), and head burn totals (46% decrease; p=0.0001) per 1000 serious fires (fig 3). Wearing hoods produced no significant differences in the distribution of face burns or scalp burns per 1000 serious fires, because these areas were always completely covered by helmet and SCBA mask. Hospital admissions for head burns were too few for analysis.

During the uniform study, frequency distribution of upper extremity burns per serious fire is shown in table 2 and per 1000 serious fires in fig 4. With the change from traditional to modern uniform, there was a significant decrease in frequency of upper extremity burns per 1000 serious fires (86% decrease; p=0.001). When

Table 2  Distribution of body burns by body region in FDNY firefighters and rate/1000 serious fires

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<tr>
<td>All burns</td>
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<tr>
<td>Upper extremity</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Burn</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>112</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Burns</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>&gt;3 Burns</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mid-arm</td>
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<td>2 Burns</td>
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<td>&gt;3 Burns</td>
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<td>Lower extremity</td>
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<td>&gt;3 Burns</td>
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*p<0.05 (TU vs MU).  **p<0.05 (MU vs MMU).

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modern was compared to modified modern uniform, there was no significant difference in frequency of upper extremity burns per 1000 serious fires (p=0.620). Throughout all periods, the majority of upper extremity burns occurred to the lower arm (94%). With the change from traditional to modern uniform, there was a significant decrease in frequency of lower arm burns per 1000 serious fires (87% decrease; p=0.001). With the change from modern to modified modern uniform, there was no significant difference in frequency of lower arm burns per 1000 serious fires (p=0.467). Upper arm and mid-arm burns were too few for analysis. The frequency distribution of lower extremity burns per serious fire is shown in table 2 and per 1000 serious fires in fig 4. With the change from traditional to modern uniform, there was a significant decrease in frequency of lower extremity burns per 1000 serious fires (93% decrease; p=0.001). The majority of lower extremity burns occurred to the anterior mid-leg (84%). With the change from traditional to modern uniform, there was no significant difference in frequency of mid-leg burns per 1000 serious fires (p=0.168). Upper leg and lower leg burns were too few for analysis. For comparison between modern and modified modern uniforms, hospital admissions were too few for analysis.

Discussion

Annual occupational injury and fatality surveys in the United States show firefighter injury rates to be higher than those of any other workforce and line-of-duty fatality rates ranking within the top five occupations. For firefighters, burns are consistently among the top three causes of injury. Our prior studies have shown that the modern uniform produced substantial reductions in upper and lower extremity burn injuries. In this current study both laboratory and FDNY field results demonstrate (1) dramatic reductions in head burns when wearing a thermal protective hood and (2) show that wearing a modified modern uniform (short sleeved T-shirt and short pants worn underneath) does not reduce thermal protection to the upper and lower extremities. No laboratory test can completely predict field results where exposures and conditions are varied and complicated but given the extreme hazards of firefighting, field testing is ethically impossible without first determining if thermal protection is acceptable under laboratory conditions. Our study is unique in several respects.

PyroMan with hood predicted no third degree head burns and head burns were nearly eliminated (fig 1). PyroMan found no significant differences in thermal protection when the modified modern...
was compared to the modern uniform and also
found no third degree body burns at any loca-
tion and no second degree leg burns (fig 2).
The advantage of using PyroMan to assess
thermal protective performance is that the
entire uniform ensemble can be evaluated
under realistic wear and fit spatial conditions
under the combined influence of helmet with
earflaps turned down, SCBA mask, and
protective overcoat with collar turned up.
PyroMan tests complement laboratory bench
tests where the relative performance of a hood
swatch is evaluated in isolation under mounted
conditions. Modern firefighting uniforms de-
rive thermal protection not only from the char-
acteristics of a single layer of material or single
garment but from interactions between multi-
ple layers and protective garments. PyroMan is
not without limitations. In addition to its
inability to test low to moderate level heat flux
exposures, PyroMan can only be positioned
upright. Firefighters are taught to remain as
low to the ground as possible during firefight-
ing. Position and repeated compression (knee
against floor) may affect location and intensity
of thermal exposure. Also, the uniform ensem-
ble tested, while including the SCBA mask, did
not include the SCBA tank and harness. Finan-
cial and safety considerations prevented this.
This may have affected reflection of ther-
mal energy towards the head and shoulders.

An important aspect of this study is the
evaluation of water content on thermal protec-
tive performance. A major concern for fire-
fighters has been whether water content (wet v
dry) affects thermal protection. The perception
being that wet hoods and uniforms lead to
burns. Burns occur when the rate of heat
transfer to skin exceeds the skin’s ability to dis-
sipate heat through circulation, conduction,
convection, and evaporation. The uniform
affords thermal protection by absorbing, inhib-
itng, and reducing the rate of heat transfer
from external fire environment to skin. The
hood’s porous weave allows air and water to be
contained within and about its fibers. Com-
pared with water, air is an excellent insulator,
markedly reducing the rate of heat transfer to
the skin. As hood water content increases the
amount of air trapped within the hood
decreases, thus elevating its conductive poten-
tial. Yet, the overall effect of increasing water
content is more complicated. As water content
increases, mass increases so that wet hoods and
uniforms store greater amounts of heat energy
before transferring that energy to the skin. In
contrast to the uniform, evaporation of water
from the hood should transfer heat energy back
to the external environment. These three
mechanisms compete in the overall heat trans-
fer process. Our data show that thermal
protection actually improved as water content
increased during simulated flashover exposure.
Current NFPA guidelines test hood and uni-
form thermal protection only under dry condi-
tions. It must be stressed that under realistic
conditions the thermal protective perfor-
ance of a dry hood and uniform is irrelevant since a firefighter fighting fires is
never dry. Water content in the hood is
relatively easy to determine and reproduce.

What remains to be determined is the exact
amount and location of water in the uniform
and the effect of lower level heat flux exposures.

The final and true evaluation of a uniform’s
thermal protective properties is its field per-
formance. This study demonstrates the high
level of thermal protection afforded FDNY
firefighters by the hood and modern uniform.
Wearing the hood, head burn totals decreased
by 46%, of which neck burns decreased by
54% and ear burns decreased by 60% (table 1).

Thermal protection from the modern uniform
was so great that the impact of clothes worn
underneath (modern = long sleeve shirt and
long pants; modified modern = shirt sleeve
T-shirt and short pants) was insignificant (table
2). It is notable that after changing from
traditional to modern or modified modern uni-
forms, upper and lower leg burns have
dramatically decreased to about one per
month, but burn severity remains a critical
issue.

A major strength of this study is the entire
workforce, rather than an artificially created
sample, was used to study the effect of uniform
modifications on burns. By studying the entire
workforce, issues such as selection bias and
differences in tenure, training, and fire experi-
ence, become irrelevant. Yet, because compari-
sions were not run concurrently this study does
have potential limitations. There were small
but significant decreases in serious fires.
Because our analysis was based on frequency
distribution of burns per fire, rather than the
incidence of burns, our results accurately
reflect the hood or uniform change rather than
the decrease in serious fires. This analysis
requires the assumption that the number of
firefighters fighting serious fires did not de-
crease over time. In fact, with the introduction
of modern uniform, modified modern uniform
and hood, the number of FDNY firefighters
per fire actually increased because of concerns
that modern uniforms may produce greater
physiologic stress. An increase in firefighters
per serious fire would only lead to our
underestimating the impact of modern protec-
tive uniforms and hoods on burn injuries.

In conclusion, laboratory tests showed that
thermal protection was: (1) dramatically im-
proved by the hood with protection increasing
as water content increased and (2) not signifi-
cantly different between modern and modified
modern uniforms, regardless of water content.
FDNY field results confirmed these tests
showing (1) significant decreases in neck burns
(by 54%), ear burns (by 60%), and head burn
totals (by 46%) wearing the hood and (2) no
significant differences in upper or lower
extremity burns wearing modern versus modi-
fied modern uniforms. Based on combined
laboratory and field results, we strongly rec-
ommend the use of modern thermal protective
hoods to reduce burns and the modified mod-
ern uniform to improve comfort and work
capacity without sacrificing thermal protec-
tion.15
This study would not have been possible without the commitment of the FDNY Fire Commissioner, the Uniformed Firefighters Association, the Uniformed Fire Officers Association, and a core group of FDNY firefighters and officers.