

Evolving Medical Standards

Showing courage, the FAA allows certain antidepressants.



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THIS PAST APRIL, THE FAA BEGAN TO CONSIDER SPECIAL ISSUANCE of medical certificates to pilots with mild-to-moderate depression who have been treated for at least 12 months on one of four antidepressant medications: fluoxetine (Prozac), sertraline (Zoloft), citalopram (Celexa) and escitalopram (Lexapro).

The news of this change made for headlines nationwide. This comment posted on cbsnews.com was typical of much public reaction: "Passengers should be informed several days before a flight if either the pilot or copilot are taking any medication that has even the remotest possibility of presenting a danger to passengers so they can make an informed decision whether to take that flight or change to a flight conducted by healthy non-medicated pilots."

Although the press was generally skeptical of the FAA's announcement, the agency stated that its goal in implementing change was twofold: "We have been considering this policy change for quite awhile. We are aware there are pilots who are depressed and flying without proper treatment. We are also aware that there are pilots who have been using these medications and falsifying their medical applications. These policy change announcements will encourage the first group to seek proper treatment for their conditions and allow the second group to come forward without fear of civil enforcement action. We are confident these changes will enhance our ability to make the airspace safer for everyone."

The FAA carefully constructed a case for the change while also building consensus among industry groups, noting: "This change in policy is consistent with recommendations from the Aerospace Medical Association, the Aircraft Owners and Pilots

Association, the Air Line Pilots Association and the International Civil Aviation Organization. The Civil Aviation Authority of Australia, Transport Canada and the U.S. Army already allow some pilots to fly while using antidepressant medications. Pilots in all three classes that meet our requirements will be granted a special issuance for six to 12 months, depending upon their age and class."

Until the pronouncement, the FAA had taken a dim view of any psychological medications. In a 2008 case, a student pilot who already held a third-class medical certificate was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). On the application for renewal of his medical certificate, he disclosed his use of Adderall. The FAA requested a current psychological evaluation, and a clinical neuropsychologist found that the pilot's attention and concentration abilities were a significant weakness, but concluded that his neurocognitive abilities were sufficient to allow him to safely operate an aircraft. A psychiatrist strongly recommended that the pilot continue Adderall indefinitely, but found no reason that this diagnosis or treatment would pose any significant risk to the pilot or to the safety of others. The FAA disagreed and denied the pilot's medical application. The pilot appealed the denial to the NTSB, but the Safety Board upheld the FAA's decision.

In a prior NTSB decision, the Safety Board ruled that, "... the FARs do not provide an exception to the rule for cases where medication is controlling an individual's symptoms. The FAA cannot monitor and cannot be expected to monitor individuals to ensure that they stay on their medication, that they are having no adverse side effects from it, and/or that the medication is continuing to be effective."

In spite of this overly broad statement, the NTSB has granted some appeals by pilots who had been prescribed drugs such as Prozac. Here is a description of a pilot who was allowed to continue flying while taking Prozac: "... a workaholic, had difficulty relaxing, had periods of severe depression lasting a couple of days, exhibited irritable and angry responses and 'type A' personality traits, and had trouble with insomnia (petitioner was sleeping about 5 hr. a night)." The doctor who testified about these symptoms went on to say that he "expressed doubt that this depression would have been noted by anyone but a skilled clinician." Perhaps so, but an experienced copilot would have spotted it right away.

The FAA's decision to allow pilots to take drugs such as Prozac was a demonstration of political bravery. The public demands "healthy, non-medicated pilots," as if "healthy" and "medicated" are mutually exclusive. Pretending that pilots aren't human doesn't make the skies safer. **BCA**

