Sources of information used by Air Traffic Controllers to decide if defined medications can be used while undertaking safety critical work

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ABSTRACT

Background: Air Traffic Controllers (ATCOs) carry out highly complex cognitive tasks in their safety critical role. This research question arose from daily practice when it was noted that there were frequent calls to NATS Occupational Health Services regarding the use of medications while controlling. There is a dearth of ATCO specific research about medication use, knowledge and information seeking behaviour.

Aim: The aim of this study was to identify the state of knowledge amongst NATS Air Traffic Controllers about 4 defined medications or groups - paracetamol, sedating antihistamines, codeine and antidepressants. ATCOs identified information sources they consulted when deciding whether it is safe to take medication while controlling aircraft. Factors influencing choice of information source were considered.

Methods: This cross-sectional descriptive study was carried out by self-administered electronic questionnaire over a 5 week period in 2013. A novel survey tool was designed and piloted in a non-operational ATCO group.

Results: There was 41.6% response rate from an eligible population of 1547 operational controllers. 66.9% had taken medications within the past month. ATCOs demonstrated good understanding of all medications regarding sedation side effects and use while controlling. NATS intranet resources and NATS Aviation Medical Examiners were the most common sources of information consulted except for paracetamol, relying on own knowledge. The most important factors identified by ATCOs were being able to speak to a doctor face-to-face and gaining aviation-specific advice.

Conclusions: NATS ATCOs are highly motivated to seek advice from appropriate aviation-specific sources. As a population well trained in decision making working in a safety critical role, it is incumbent on aviation health professionals to educate ATCOs regarding medication and advise them of accurate information sources.