Work-related stress and job satisfaction in commercial aviation pilots

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ABSTRACT

Background: Work-related stress is well established as the second most common cause of work-related ill-health. Organisational changes within the airline industry have increased pilots’ exposure to psychosocial risk factors for work-related stress. Performance decrements associated with stress may impact on flight safety.

Aims: To evaluate work-related stress in commercial aviation pilots based on a transactional framework.

Methods: A cross-sectional survey was completed by 462 commercial aviation pilots attending for routine aviation medical examination.

Results: The response rate was 86%. Pilots reported significant exposure to risk factors for work-related stress as determined by the HSE Management Standards Indicator Tool; the areas of control, management, support and change were identified as particular causes for concern. 27.3% of respondents were identified as stress ‘cases’, with negative affectivity, inability to influence work patterns and airline instability all associated with caseness. Extrinsic and overall job satisfaction scores were significantly lower than comparable occupations and showed a significant decrease compared with pilots’ scores in 1985. However, job-related anxiety and depression were found to be significantly lower in pilots compared with benchmark data for comparable occupational grade and industrial sector.

Conclusions: Based on the evidence obtained in this study, commercial pilots should be considered a high-risk group for work-related stress. Airlines should conduct risk assessments amongst the pilot workforce to determine company-specific areas of concern and target any necessary interventions.