

Safety board wants sleep apnea screening for drivers

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BALTIMORE – The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) renewed its campaign this week to broaden the use of sleep disorder screening across all modes of transportation – air, rail, marine, and trucking – as part of a long-term effort to significantly reduce the negative effects of fatigue.

“Last summer we recommended that all modes begin identifying people with high risk for sleep disorders and guide them to medical treatment,” Christopher Hart, NTSB’s Vice Chairman, said in a speech here at the Sleep Apnea and Trucking Conference. The two-day event is being hosted by the American Sleep Apnea Assn. and co-sponsored by the American Trucking Assns. (ATA) and Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA).

“All transportation operations need to become more aware of OSA [obstructive sleep apnea],” Hart said. “The good news is that those suffering from sleep apnea can be treated and then return to work. But it’s important that we find better ways to diagnose and treat such sleep disorders.”

According to the NTSB, OSA is a condition where airways become obstructed while sleeping, typically resulting in “hypoxia” or low blood oxygen levels at night. The obstruction leads to interruptions in breathing lasting several seconds at a time, loud snoring, and non-restful sleep. Individuals with OSA are frequently entirely unaware of the

condition with the disorder leading to extreme daytime sleepiness and sufferers often falling asleep within minutes in a quiet or monotonous environment.

In addition to the substantial risks of impairment or incapacitation as a direct result of the fatigue associated with OSA, the untreated disorder increases the likelihood of other operationally relevant medical conditions, including stroke, heart failure, coronary artery disease, and diabetes, says the NTSB.

Ironically, the NTSB notes there are few rules in transportation addressing OSA. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) does not provide any guidance regarding risk factors for sleep disorders or identify any symptoms (for example, snoring) that might be related to OSA, while the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) has no formal medical standards for transit operators.

In trucking, FMCSA asks about sleep disorders, OSA, daytime sleepiness, and snoring on the questionnaire completed by commercial truck drivers undergoing examination for medical certification. Further, the FMCSA Medical Review Board in 2008 recommended that the administration require OSA screening for all drivers with a body mass index (BMI) over 30, but the FMCSA has yet to act on that recommendation, Hart said.

According to industry studies, some 28% of truck drivers suffer from OSA or “sleep apnea” as it’s referred to, compared to 4% for the general population. Yet OSA is only

one of 70 different disorders, noted Mary Parrish, VP-Transportation Safety for the sleep disorder management firm Fusion Sleep, who offers the Sleep4Safety program.

“The real issue isn’t so much diagnosis and treatment of sleep disorders in the early stages, but on-going compliance with the treatments,” she told FleetOwner. “There’s also recognition now that it’s not just about how sleep disorders can increase fatigue, but how they impact truck driver wellness – potentially leading to obesity, type II diabetes, and high blood pressure, to name just a few conditions. “There is an increasing health cost issue here in terms of the impact of sleep disorders which go untreated. Our goal in offering transportation sleep medicine services is to improve the health and extend the lives of these hard working professionals while offering an industry with slim margins an opportunity to save a lot of money and increase the safety of America’s roads.”

Anne Ferro, FMCSA’s administrator, said at the meeting that her agency is heightening its focus on sleep apnea.

“We consider fatigue to be a high risk behavior, something we’re addressing as part of our core mission to reduce severe and fatal crashes involving commercial motor vehicles (CMVs),” she said, pointing to agency data gleaned from it mammoth truck causation study that identified fatigue a factor in 13% of all fatal truck crashes, rising to 28% in single CMV crashes. ■