

BARBADOS TODAY

Column: In My Interest

Article: The Hazards of the Skies

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On a daily basis, thousands of persons around the world enjoy the luxury of air travel. On the other side of the coin, the friendly skies become the workplace for pilots and crew members. These groups of professionals are not alone, as they are joined by thousands who commute by air as part of the requirements of the job. This group is generally referred to as business travellers. Those who work in the friendly skies are like any other worker, predisposed to hazards and risks.

Persons who travel by air are quite aware of the dangers they face when they board an aircraft. Anyone who may want to play ignorant of this, would be quick to come to grips with this reality, based on the rigorous security checks to which they are subjected. The news of a recent air tragedy is enough to drive a semblance of fear in the heart of the average traveller. Whether persons commute on ground or by whatever means, they have no alternative but to place their confidence in those at the controls of the aircraft, train, ship, ferry, car or bus.

Those who work in the aviation industry are likely to be more conscious of the demands placed upon them. Pilots, cabin crewmembers, mechanics and other support professionals such as air traffic controllers, have an awesome responsibility to ensure the safety of passengers. These are all specialists, who are highly trained professional. In the aviation industry, those who work in security may not find themselves being categorized in much the same way as those with the elite group referred to above.

It may appear that those in security fall at the bottom of the scale, but in fact, it would be a grave error of judgment, if it was not recognized that they play a key role in the sector. Prior to entering an aircraft, all persons inclusive of pilots cabin crew members, airline and airport staff, are all subject to security checks by the security personnel. The safety of the environment is paramount. It becomes a case of who will guard the guard, and so even security personnel on reporting for duty are subjected to security checks.

While systems are in place to ensure the safety of all on board an aircraft, the world still has to wake up to tragedies such as that of a German pilot who allegedly crashed the aircraft into the French Alps; killing himself, passengers and crew on board. What does this teach the world? It conveys that despite best efforts, there are no guarantees that air travel is or will ever be completely safe.

Out of this event, it should be clear that workers at all levels in the industry are subject to stress and burnout. This is something that apparently employers paid little attention too. Admittedly, it is not easy to manage. What then is the solution? Inasmuch that passengers on a public mode of transport have confidence in the person(s) at the controls, that or those individuals have a responsibility to bring issues which may impact them either emotionally or psychologically to the attention of the employer. This may be a hard task for some, but how do we get around this, particularly as it pertains to pilots?

It is to be respected that doctor–patient confidentiality must not be breached. However, should it be the responsibility of the doctor to report to the employer any severe illness of an employee which is stress related or of a psychological nature? Should this be a matter for consideration especially where the employee works in an environment that places members of the public at risk, and can potentially compromise workplace and customer safety?

The recent tragic accident where a German pilot allegedly crashed a Lufthansa Airbus into the French Alps, brings home the point of the vulnerability of air travel. Moreover, it brings to the fore the vulnerable nature of workplaces in which people work. It is another wake up call to the fact that nothing can be taken for granted.

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