



HIMS: The Aviation Industry Challenges a Human Condition.

What in the world is HIMS? A good question and probably not many will know the answer. This article takes a look at an insidious threat affecting the aviation profession and outlines why HIMS is an important initiative for NZ aviation.

Take a guess at what you might think is the most common identified medical cause of an airliner crash. Heart attack? Stroke? Fits? All wrong.

ICAO Accident Investigation Findings

A study compiled by ICAO examined the worldwide database of crashes during a recent 21 year period. 10 accidents were assigned a medical cause by the investigators. Of the 10 accidents six had a significant finding attributing the crash to the use of alcohol or other drugs by the pilots. In an automated multi-crew environment conditions causing risky behaviour are much more dangerous than dramatic incapacitations. Just like any other occupational group pilots are not immune to the ravages of substance abuse or substance dependence. For pilots the substance most likely to cause problems is alcohol.

Symptoms of Dependence

What are we talking about here? Not the large numbers amongst us who drink a bit more than we should? No, we're talking about a smaller group of individuals who over time have gradually started to lose control of their drinking until eventually they develop some of the cardinal signs of dependence. These include:

Compulsion - drinking to stop from feeling unwell, unhappy or afraid and not being able to say NO.

Preoccupation - planning to drink to drunkenness and neglecting responsibilities because of drinking.

Tolerance - needing more alcohol to get the same effect and losing the ability to gauge when drunk. Often being the one who can 'drink everyone else under the table'.

Consequences - neglecting the impact on relationships, finances, health, work performance and possibly trouble with the law - "he's a lovely guy when he's sober".

Blackout - drinking to the point of not being able to remember what happened the night before.

So surely if a pilot got like that they would just do something about it - right? Unfortunately not. Around the world good, capable, intelligent and well-intentioned pilots continue to be caught with a positive breath alcohol test and often display the symptoms listed above. This is not wilful behaviour though but an insidious, cruel and deceptive illness. And the interesting and sad thing is that often their fellow pilots suspected (or knew) that there was a problem.

Dependency isn't really an illness is it - surely that's just a cop-out, an excuse?



HIMS NZ

A Programme for Managing Substance Use Disorders in Aviation

Treatment Available

It's an illness all right – with a strong genetic predisposition, associated abnormal brain chemistry and with a predictable symptom set. The good news though is that there is a reliable and successful treatment. Not a cure, but treatment.

Well, aviation companies have random testing programmes so surely we can just catch people and that solves the problem? No, unfortunately testing programmes will often only catch people when the disease has progressed. If someone tests positive then it's going to be hard for them to retain their job. That is why we have introduced the HIMS programme.

Is this something new? Well yes it is for NZ but the HIMS programme has been around for almost 40 years. So what on earth is it?

In the 1970's in the USA, identified alcohol dependence meant permanent loss of pilots licence for medical reasons. So it was a problem that was never diagnosed – until too late. But then three doctors from the FAA, the Union and one of the airlines got together and decided there must be a better way. The programme created was called HIMS (the Human Intervention and Motivation Study) to give no clue as to what it was really about. Its purpose was about getting help early for pilots who were suspected by their fellow pilots or their loved ones of having a problem, before they got into trouble. Nearly 40 years on that programme has successfully returned well over 4,000 US pilots to flying with an extraordinary long-term success rate of around 90 %. That is the power of a peer-led programme in which sobriety is a condition of continued employment.

HIMS - NZ Edition

The New Zealand edition has a much shorter history but we have modelled our programme on the US success. HIMS NZ helps pilots and air traffic controllers with alcohol and other chemical dependency issues return to work after successful treatment and sooner than they otherwise could. HIMS does this by working within the NZ aviation industry, training people to be peer volunteers and by educating aviation management staff. CAA's Principal Medical Officer Dougal Watson, who has assisted with setting up HIMS NZ, says that "drug dependency, especially alcohol, has been a perennial issue. Each case needs to be handled differently, depending on the degree of addiction."

How will it work? HIMS NZ has put together a group of aviation specialists including pilots who have been down the track of dependence and turned their lives around. The group has the written support of the leaders of Air New Zealand, Airways Corporation, the RNZAF, NZALPA, Federation of Air NZ Pilots, Qantas/Jet Connect and the Director of Civil Aviation. We have strong interest from further industry groups and expect others to join. The team is primarily made up of pilots and controllers aided by aviation doctors who will get involved when appropriate. Principally HIMS is about providing a pathway whereby you can raise confidential concerns about a colleague, friend, or partner. We will provide advice,



information and assistance in addressing dependency issues and how to go about getting help for pilots or controllers before they put their lives or livelihood at risk.

Spanning the Aviation Industry

So it's just for airline pilots and controllers? No, we have extended the scope to aviation professionals nationwide including the military and GA sector. Drugs and alcohol don't mix with any type of flying in any combination and there has been a societal change in attitude which reflects this. Our aim is to get people who need treatment into some sort of recovery programme, or at the very minimum, be assessed to see if they need treatment. We're happy to provide this help to anyone in the aviation community who needs it. The flying fraternity is a tight knit group. Many in aviation have seen friends or colleagues go through the stages of having no issue with alcohol to misuse, abuse and finally dependency. Like any family the means to stop the process and provide help lies within. You only have to ask how.

You can access the programme online via the HIMS web site www.hims.org.nz for details of the recovery process. This proven sequence of steps – peer identification, intervention, evaluation and diagnosis, treatment and recertification has a high rate of success. Any queries to the HIMS NZ team will be treated with strict confidentiality.

Everyone Needs to be Involved

Going by the US experience some participants enrol in the programme on their own because they realise they have a problem and need to do something about it and soon. However, it is more common that pilots and controllers enter the HIMS programme as a result of an intervention by colleagues who support the programme or by HIMS trained management personnel who encourage them into the programme. The point is it is everyone's responsibility to address a problem when they see it. You will not be doing someone with a dependency issue any favours by looking away.

The disease of dependency is an insidious threat facing the aviation industry. The HIMS NZ team needs your help to keep our profession and industry safe and to deliver the help to those who need it.

Further information about HIMS and contact details can be found at www.hims.org.nz

HIMS NZ Team