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Is there a doctor in the fleet?



The national focus on driver health and its impact on safety

BY WENDY LEAVITT

We've focused on brakes, we've focused on tires—all of those things—but the Crash Causation Study shows us that we clearly need to focus on drivers and the issues surrounding them," observed Administrator Annette M. Sandberg, head of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Admin-

istration (FMCSA), at a recent public meeting of certified medical examiners. Sandberg was not talking about driver training or experience or even technical expertise; she was talking about health and wellness.

Today, FMCSA has three major driver health initiatives underway, including the creation of a five-member Medical Review Board to provide advice on how to update the current physical qualifica-

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tions for drivers, the development of a National Registry of Medical Examiners who are certified to provide the required DOT physicals, and the merger of the CDL and Medical Certificate into a single document. Each of these projects is intended to improve highway safety by making it easier to identify and weed out drivers who have health problems that make them unsafe, while permitting qualified drivers with now-controllable medical conditions to continue working.

Updating driver physical qualifications

It may seem strange to hear that the criteria for a person fit enough to perform the task of driving could have altered over the past couple of decades. People are still the same after all and healthy is still healthy, right? Well, yes and no, according to the FMCSA, which will be reviewing all current medical standards and guidance for physicians and developing new standards where gaps exist.

For starters, there are now thirteen standards directly related to medical requirements for commercial motor vehicle (CMV) drivers—four are specific and nine are general. The specific standards deal with physical requirements relating to vision, hearing, use of insulin, and seizure disorder (epilepsy). These are not open to interpretation by a medical examiner. The remaining nine, however, are general in scope, so medical examiners must decide whether or not such medical conditions will negatively affect the driver's ability to safely operate a commercial motor vehicle.

"The medical advisory criteria under CFR 49 Part 391.41 (available at www.fmcsa.dot.gov/rules-regulations/administration/fmcsr/391.41.htm) provide the medical examiner with recommendations and FMCSA interpretations of the medical standards," explains FMCSA. "Much of this guidance is outdated. Complex issues, such as an aging commercial motor vehicle workforce population and lack of medical examiner training and certification, complicate the CMV driver medical certification process."

The proposed Medical Review Board would be the entity charged with sorting out issues such as these and recommending changes to the current standards and practices.

Certifying examiners

While there seems to be general agreement on the need for updating driver medical qualifications to reflect the current best practices and medical advances, there are some outstanding questions concerning the proposed National Registry of Certified Medical Examiners, including its potential impact on costs and

on the number of physicians available to perform the estimated 6.4 million physicals now conducted on a biannual basis. These issues will be addressed later in the rulemaking process.

The stated need for the Registry, however, is clear: "There is evidence that improper medical certification has contributed directly to crashes," reports the FMCSA. "The National Transportation Safety Board, for example, has documented cases where drivers with serious disqualifying medical conditions were involved in significant fatal and injury crashes."

Heal the job; heal the driver

There is an irony at the very heart of driving a truck for a living. Those who choose to do it typically long for independence and a life free from the "hassles of a desk job." In reality, of course, there is absolutely nothing hassle-free about being a professional truck operator today. There are regulations and plenty of them, tight schedules, tedious paperwork requirements and long periods away from home.

Driving also offers regular exposure to numerous health-battering hazards that take their steady toll a little bit at a time, such as diesel exhaust emissions, poor diet, sitting in the same position for extended periods day after day, irregular hours and steady stress. In an attempt to help offset some of these negative factors, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) began requiring carriers to provide mandatory wellness and fatigue management training to all new drivers last October. Most agree that training in these areas is a necessary step in the right direction. It is the step after that, however, structuring the job itself to promote better driver health and job satisfaction, which is the bigger challenge and the one with potentially larger rewards.

Imagine recreating the job of the driver from scratch, no holds barred. George Washington University management professor, William E. Halal does exactly that. He is widely recognized as a leading authority on institutional and economic change, strategic management and emerging technologies. His view of the driving profession embraces the principles he believes will guide businesses in the future: entrepreneurial freedom, the cooperative flow of information and knowledge.

According to the Agency, if established, the proposed Registry will be a directory of certified medical examiners who “fully understand the medical standards in the FMCSA regulations and how they relate to the mental and physical demands of operating a commercial motor vehicle.”

Now the question on the table is: Is this strategy the best option available? “The problem is finding a way to fix this problem without creating new ones,” observes Robert Hirsch, founder and president of the non-profit National Academy of DOT Medical

Examiners (www.nadme.org). “Establishing the criteria is the FMCSA’s job; it is what they are charged with doing. At NADME, however, we believe that the medical examiner certification process can be better handled in the private sector. The last thing we want to do is diminish the number of examiners available to do driver physicals or increase the cost.

“An incentive-based program that gives doctors a reason to participate can provide a much more efficient and effective approach,” he adds.

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“For starters, I think it might be useful for drivers to organize themselves into teams,” offers Halal. “This would create a labor market within the organization in which the drivers would bid on loads, routes or contracts. Work would be awarded based upon the performance of the team and the merit of their bid, which might include service considerations and even rates.

“Under this system, drivers would have the freedom to work out problems among themselves, such as a team member’s need to get home for a family event, hours of service issues, illnesses, personal preferences regarding trips and so on,” he explains. “Not only would this make their workdays more satisfying, but by harnessing the energy and imagination of the drivers themselves, it would also open up new possibilities for innovation.”

Schneider National took a step in this direction last February with the launch of its “Home Run” program, the largest compensation and work-life improvement package in the company’s 70-year history. Under the program, drivers living in proximity to one another are organized into “pods” of three drivers or teams who operate two tractors on a rotating schedule. This permits each pod member to be home 17 weeks a year. So far, Schneider reports that 250 of their drivers are currently participating in the new program, and that number is expected to double by the end of the year.

Setting aside assumptions about the job of driving can help to bring new, potentially healthier work solutions into view. For example, here is a starter list of other job-focused ideas to help enhance driver wellness and satisfaction:

■ Use navigation and tracking technology where practical to divide trips into smaller relay segments, so drivers can get home more often.

■ Pay as much attention to drivers departing on time as you do to on-time deliveries to structure the trip for success.

■ Study travel routes and query drivers about persistent problem areas, such as traffic bottlenecks and make any changes possible to reduce driver fatigue and stress.

■ Work with your travel plaza partners to encourage them to offer healthy meal alternatives and then provide your drivers with menu information and dollar-off coupons to make those choices more affordable.

■ Create a directory of travel plazas and other rest stops that offer workout facilities for drivers.

■ Encourage or even facilitate wellness check-ups for drivers to help them identify potential health issues early, before their CDL is on the line at their required bi-annual physical.

■ Where possible, offer drivers schedule options that provide more rest and home time.

■ Finally, consider ways to provide your drivers with a career path.

“There are a host of potential benefits for fleets that find ways to develop legitimate career paths for their drivers, says Hank Hoffman, president of communications provider SiriComm. “Imagine working at a job where there is no way to grow; where ten years from now your job will be virtually the same as today; where your pay may have kept pace with inflation but not grown enough to change your lifestyle and where your skill level will have remained the same along with your status in the industry,” he says. “No wonder there is so much churn within the driver population. We believe that giving drivers a way to increase their value to the company can dramatically reduce driver turnover, improve productivity, enhance safety and security, and reduce costs.” That sounds like a prescription for healthier drivers and healthier fleets.



“To be truly successful, everyone has to benefit—the general public, carriers and drivers, and physicians.”

The National Academy of DOT Medical Examiners is one attempt at establishing such a program. According to Hirsch, the purpose of the new organization is to “promote and enhance the quality and level of professional knowledge and skills of medical practitioners and other individuals who perform or assist in the performance of medical exams to determine the physical qualification of drivers of commercial motor vehicles.”

In order to accomplish this, the organization recently created an on-line learning system for medical examiners that is designed to make training on the legal requirements governing the driver physical exam readily and conveniently available. Medical examiners who pass the NADME examination after completing the training will be awarded the NADME certification, notes Hirsch, and New York City’s Mount Sinai Medical School will also award six continuing medical education credit hours to every medical examiner who completes the program.

The FMCSA National Registry of Certified

Medical Examiners is not necessarily incompatible with programs such as NADME. In fact, the FMCSA proposal already includes mention of “partnerships with public and private sector organizations” to accomplish the set-up and maintenance of the Registry, even though responsibility would rest with the Agency.

Merging CDL & medical certificate

The third FMCSA driver health action item is to combine the CDL and the driver’s medical certificate into a single record. A Notice of Proposed Rulemaking is scheduled to be published in March of 2006, where the details will be presented and public comment solicited, according to the FMCSA.

It is, of course, in everyone’s best interest to make sure that only healthy drivers who are fit for the difficult job they do are out on the nation’s highways. Over the months ahead, the trucking industry will have many opportunities to explore ways to help achieve that goal. You can learn much more about FMCSA’s driver health and wellness initiatives at the Agency’s websites, including: www.nrcme.fmcsa.dot.gov.

HOS: More rest is best

The new hours-of-service (HOS) regulations were intended to improve highway safety by improving driver alertness, the theory being that a little more rest on a schedule closer to what nature had in mind would be beneficial. So has it been? Have those extra two off-duty hours and the other HOS schedule changes translated into safer drivers?

According to preliminary findings by the American Transportation Research Institute (ATRI), they have indeed. ATRI is organized as a not-for-profit research trust and is part of the American Trucking Associations Federation. In November 2004, they initiated independent research to gauge the difference in collision and driver injury rates for 2003 and 2004, before and after the change in HOS.

“Our research is not finalized yet, but we do have some preliminary findings,” says Rebecca Brewster, ATRI president and COO. “Our data set for this research represents over 100,000 drivers and over 10.5 billion fuel tax miles. We solicited carrier in-

put and also surveyed drivers. The carrier data shows a 3.7% reduction in the collision rate per million miles under the new HOS. We are also seeing an injury rate reduction of 12.6% per million miles. In other words, our research indicates that the new HOS are having a positive impact on highway safety.” The complete report is scheduled to be published this October.

ATRI, in conjunction with the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA), also offers training on fatigue management and driver wellness, according to Brewster. “It is a day-long ‘train the trainer’ course offered at no charge through the state trucking associations,” she explains.

“There are two parts to the course: ‘Mastering Alertness and Managing Driver Fatigue’ and ‘Gettin’ in Gear’ [sic], the section on driver wellness. We have trained over 4,000 safety professionals since we began offering the program,” Brewster adds.

Safety professionals interested in learning more about the training are invited to contact ATRI at ATRI@trucking.org.