Letters to the Editors

Corporate affiliation bias and BAe 146 aircraft: Senate report

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The Australian Senate has completed an inquiry into aircraft air quality in the BAe 146 aircraft because of many incidents of apparent toxic illness among the crew.

The Senate Committee concluded that cabin contamination continues to occur(1) and that this has led to short-term and medium-term health problems for a number of BAe 146 flight crew.(1)

The inquiry has tested the ability of medical science in Australia to objectively appraise the evidence of the health effects of the aircraft. The inquiry found professional opinion differed. Opinion of some experts was that the cabin air quality was hazardous and other opinion said it was not.

Submissions to the Senate inquiry spanned a full range of opinion. At one end of the spectrum toxicologists and others documented the neurotoxicity of organo-phosphates and naphthalenamines in aircraft oils and fluids and design faults in the BAe 146 aircraft with resulting cabin contamination and illness among passengers and crew. In contrast to this, the executive general manager of Ansett Australia stated "[i]t is the clear view of Ansett Australia that its fleet of BAe 146 aircraft are safe for crew and passengers alike".(2)

"The (Senate) Committee notes that opinion on the hazardous nature of exposure to oil fumes is divided almost exactly between affected flight crew and their medical advisers on the one hand, and the airline industry and CASA [Civil Aviation Safety Authority] on the other". (1)

Of course, some variation in professional views is to be expected. However, these findings indicate that professional opinion was not independent and varied according to affiliation with either employee or employer. This finding calls into question the credibility of expert opinion. This affiliation bias of professional opinion in the context of occupational liability is another example to add to the existing compendium of documented medical biases.(3) Such an affiliation bias is not new to industrial medicine. A classic case was asbestosis, which was recognised for decades before acknowledged by employers.

The findings of the Senate inquiry substantiate a corporate affiliation bias towards the under-recognition of health problems associated with the BAe 146 aircraft and the general reluctance of private business to uphold the value of human health.

We need to reflect on the origin of this failure to publicly acknowledge illness associated with work. We now learn that flight crew in this aircraft have been affected in Australia and overseas for years and design modifications to rectify cabin air contamination have been implemented repeatedly for just as long. It has taken a Senate inquiry to inform treating doctors of the presence and nature of the occupational hazard, professional experts consulted by the airline having failed to do so.

We are in a corporate era in which accountability to employees and responsibility for individuals' welfare will not be assured without government authority routinely upholding standards of public health. Privatisation is fine for profit but not for public protection.

References
2. Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee. Air Safety and Cabin Air Quality in the BAe 146 Aircraft: Submission. Canberra: Senate Printing Unit, Parliament House, 2000 October. volume 2, p. 188.

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