

## **Saving Lives or Saving Dollars: The Trump Administration Rescinds Plans to Require Sleep Apnea Testing in Commercial Transportation Operators**

In another move favoring business interests and against the common good, the Trump administration's Department of Transportation announced recently that they are rescinding plans to require testing for obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) in train and commercial motor vehicle operators (1). As exemplified by its withdrawal from the Paris climate accords, this decision is another example of how the current administration disregards scientific findings and present-day events in establishing policy that will be detrimental to Americans.

Let us step back for a moment and briefly review the evidence that the Trump administration has ignored.

- It is well established that obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) can result in daytime sleepiness (2) and that sleepiness is detrimental to safe operation of a train or motor vehicle.
- Many studies have established that persons with OSA have an increased risk of motor vehicle crashes (3).
- Studies in commercial truck drivers have observed that this population has a high prevalence of OSA (4).
- It is estimated that OSA costs the American economy \$150 billion annually (5).
- There now are relatively easy and inexpensive protocols to screen high risk individuals for OSA (4).
- Obstructive sleep apnea is a treatable condition, and treatment mitigates OSA impairment in sleepiness and reduces crash risk (6,7). In contrast, non-compliance with treatment is associated with a five-fold increase in crash risk (6).
- The costs of diagnosis and treatment are much lower than the costs that ensue when OSA persists untreated (5). For example, significant healthcare savings result from successful treatment of truck drivers (8).
- Failure to recognize and treat OSA has resulted in several high-profile transportation accidents. The following are some recent incidents:
  - September 2016: A commuter rail train slammed into the station at Hoboken, NJ killing a female bystander and leaving a child without a mother. The engineer had undiagnosed severe OSA (9).
  - December 2013: A Metro North commuter rail engineer fell asleep and his train sped around a curve resulting in a crash that killed 4 and injured 70 (10). The National Transportation Safety Board determined that undiagnosed severe OSA was the probable cause of the accident. The lack of a policy which required sleep disorder screening was further determined to be a contributing factor (11).
  - September 2013: A Greyhound bus overturned on Interstate 70 because the driver fell asleep resulting in multiple injuries. The driver was later found to have untreated OSA (12).

- June 2009: A tractor-trailer traveling at a high speed did not see stopped cars ahead on Interstate 44 resulting in a crash that killed 10 and injured 6. It was later determined that the truck driver had mild OSA contributing to fatigue (13).

Despite the weight of the aforementioned evidence, the current administration has chosen to ignore it in favor of letting private industry regulate itself implying the current regulations are sufficient. As illustrated by the incidents cited above, **recent events have proven them wrong**. As Sir Winston Churchill once said “Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it”. Continuing with the current policy will inevitably result in further preventable disasters and more loss of life.

What can be done? At the federal level, one should consider advocating to your own congressional representatives for reconsideration of this poorly considered policy. On a personal level, federal policy is ultimately guided by the “ballot box”, which is something to consider for the next election. Finally, be aware that the next time you are driving down the interstate, the truck or bus driver approaching you from behind may have untreated OSA!

Stuart F. Quan, M.D.<sup>1,2</sup>, Laura K. Barger, Ph.D.<sup>1</sup>, Matthew D. Weaver, Ph.D.<sup>1</sup>, and Charles A. Czeisler, Ph.D., M.D.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Division of Sleep and Circadian Disorders  
Brigham and Women's Hospital  
Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA USA

<sup>2</sup>Asthma and Airway Disease Research Center  
University of Arizona College of Medicine  
Tucson, AZ USA

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