

The determined traveller

By Garrett Kwakkestein RN

Regional airlines are becoming more and more efficient, with many carriers implementing electronic ticket kiosks and outsourcing the security check-in process to third parties. However, along with these efficiencies comes a decreasing amount of human contact between the airline and passengers, including travellers determined to board a flight, even when potentially ill.

It is, therefore, even more important this season for gate agents and crew members to pay close attention during the boarding process, especially to passengers who are influenced by family and friends to travel without fully understanding the health risks associated with flying and the unforgiving influences of altitude and flight duration. In times past, there were greater numbers of human interventions between passengers arriving at the airport and the airline staff. Today, this human contact is reduced significantly, resulting in what is referred to as the 'Swiss Cheese Model of Safety' (see image).

Imagine a series of slices of Swiss cheese stacked next to each other.

With the holes in random places, one can imagine the potential for a compromised passenger to slip through the holes in the system of trained observers. What many of these compromised travellers fail to understand, however, is the pathophysiology of their disease process, the resulting impact of air travel on their condition, how to manage their disease in flight and the warning signs when their condition deteriorates. In some circles, this mindset is called 'Go-Syndrome', defined as an overwhelming desire to compromise risk for potential results. A prime example is the traveller determined to fly to his or her destination without thought of the possible consequences.

And, of course, when patients do not fully understand their medical condition, they can inadvertently take the risk of causing an inflight medical crisis.

It is common for an individual to arrive at the gate with bottled oxygen in use, stating that he or she "needs it" but "can go without it" during the flight. These statements could not be any further from the truth. However, such passengers will commonly mislead staff, or simply

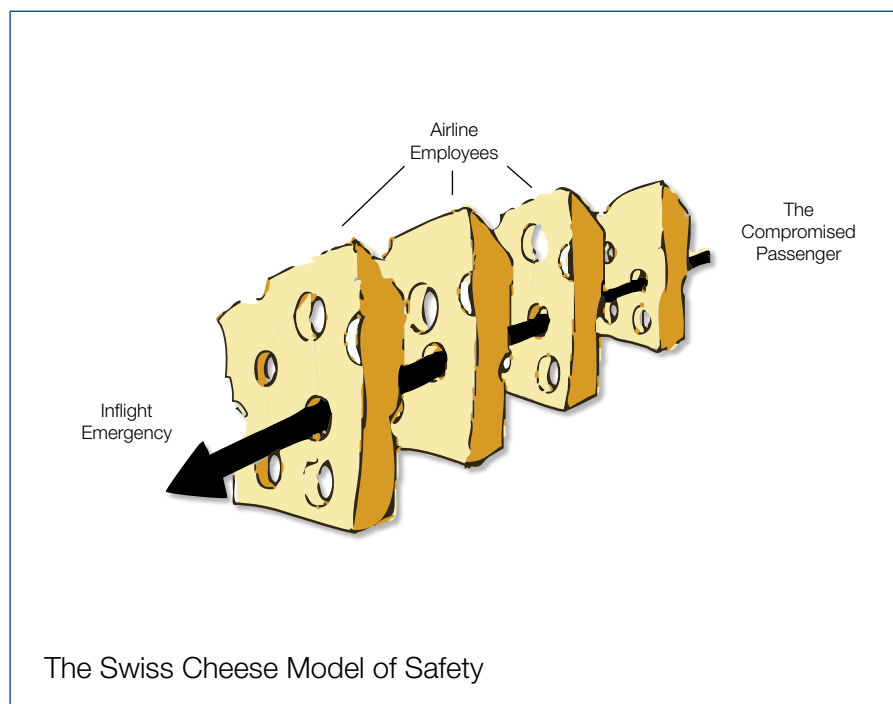
change the facts, when they sense that their freedom to travel is in jeopardy. When this type of situation occurs, it becomes prudent for the crew member to investigate.

The importance of crew awareness

Safety comes first. Simple crew member awareness can stop a chain of potentially harmful events from ever occurring. A member of the crew denying the ill traveller passage prevents that person from endangering himself or others from a medical condition that might worsen in flight and could even result in death. Such actions might also prevent diversion of the aircraft into a remote part of the world, and avoid the costs associated with accommodation and meals for the re-routed passengers and crew.

This chain of events can occur as a result of one person, unaware of the full details of his or her illness, with only an overwhelming desire to fly to the destination – at all costs – placing everyone at risk.

Gate agents, cabin crew and flight crew, when alert and aware of passengers travelling with compromising medical conditions, can effectively minimise the risks involved for everyone and potentially prevent an inflight emergency. ■



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