

Short Communication

Professional Truck Drivers with Metabolic and Sleep Disorders Report Psychiatric Symptoms and Limited Access to Medical Care

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Professional truck driving favors unhealthy lifestyles and medical disorders. Illicit drugs, immoderate alcohol (with insomnia associated in 36-72%), abused/misused therapeutic drugs, wrong diet, disordered or inadequate sleeping are common. The risks of chronic diseases (e.g. metabolic syndrome, T2 diabetes, cardiovascular or psychiatric disorders) are higher than in other occupational conditions, including night- or shift-workers. The impact appears severe: US male truck drivers have shorter life expectation (55.7 and 63.0 yrs. for non-unionized and unionized drivers, respectively) than the general population (75.1 yrs.) [1-3].

Sleep, psychiatric and metabolic disorders are often co-morbid and individually or in combination increase the risks of road accidents. Sleep disorders or inadequate sleeping (reported by 20.0-28.6% of truckers) can interfere with the circadian rhythms that are essential to adaptation and efficient action and therefore result in excessive daytime drowsiness. A correlation between psychiatric symptoms and disordered sleep is documented and the latter is frequently associated to obesity or overweight - a risk factor for co-morbidity as critical as diabetes or hypertension observed in over 50% of truckers. The estimated crash rate is almost double for overweight truckers; sleep disorders result in a 2-to-8 time higher risk of accident [4], that further increases (55%) among obese drivers [5].

Registered professional truckers number 3.5 to 18 million in

Table 1: Major barriers to a proper access to medical care as reported by professional truckers [6].

unpredictable working schedule	23.4 %
lack of health insurance	16.1 %
inadequate servicing by the Department of Transportation	10.1 %
"neither trusting nor liking doctors" or "not believing in medicine"	5.1 %
inaccessibility to health care	4.1 %
ill-defined inability to afford medical care despite health insurance	4.4%
multiple housing locations	3.8 %
not knowing where to go	3.5 %
language problems	0.6 %
unavailable physicians	0.3 %

countries like USA, EU, Brazil, India or China, with an estimated increase above 4.5%/yr. in eastern Europe. Government, industry and healthcare providers act to keep the automotive transport sector profitable and competitive while taking care of the public safety and drivers' health. Control nevertheless appears insufficient, and truckers remain by profession vulnerable to a variety of health risks, of which they often appear to be unaware. For instance, their overall mental health was self-rated as poor or very poor only in 1.3% of cases, in contrast with the reported incidence of psychiatric symptoms in percentages varying from 1.8% to 47.2%. Truckers are also underserved by the health organizations according to population studies. At variance with a 10.8% reportedly needing no medical help, the majority complained of not receiving adequate medical attention (Table 1) and only 8.4% had medication for mental health problems prescribed by a physician (antidepressants in 7.8%) [6].

Some concern about having their professional driving certification withdrawn is conceivable; nevertheless, truck drivers appear in general to overestimate their health condition and underestimate their health problems. Dedicated educational projects are needed to disseminate awareness of the problem. A pragmatic large-scale action is mandatory to counterbalance the truckers' professional health risks, prevent unhealthy lifestyles, improve road safety, and control medical costs.

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