



(For Immediate Release)

MEDIA STATEMENT

31 March 2015

SACAA Statement on Health Issues Pertaining to Flight Deck Crew

Midrand, Johannesburg, 31-03-2015. The SACAA has learnt with concern of articles that cast a doubt on the mental health status of South African pilots. The statements made in these newspaper articles are regrettable and simply intended to be sensational. It is implausible that the approximately 17 000 South African pilots are unfit to fly aircraft because of mental conditions. It is unfortunate and disappointing that certain individuals that are privy to less than a handful of cases can simply generalise and conclude that the entire country's pilot community suffers from mental ailments. It is also reckless to assert that there are no regulations or guiding tools to assist in identifying aviators and pilots that may suffer mental or physical illness that may render them incapable of discharging their duties.

It is for this reason that the SACAA wishes to highlight the following facts:

The South African aviation industry adheres to international standards

Since 1947 South Africa has been a subscriber to the 1944 Chicago Convention on International Civil Aviation. Under this ambit, South Africa, through the SACAA, must exercise civil aviation safety and security oversight in line with International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) guidelines. This is done through localised Civil Aviation Regulations that are in line with the prescribed ICAO Standards and Recommended Practices.

According to ICAO, pilot incapacitation (due to health issues) has been of concern for as long as powered flight has existed, hence medical standards and protocols for aviation personnel were introduced. Medical incapacitation can be defined as any physiological or psychological state or situation that adversely affects performance. Regulations require that aviators are licensed and certified for specific duties. More specifically, pilots, cabin crew and air traffic controllers are expected to meet certain medical standards in order to ensure that they are free from any physical and mental abnormality that could entail a

degree of functional incapacitation which is likely to interfere with the safe operation of an aircraft or with the safe performance of duties.

The reality is that aviators, pilots in particular, undergo extensive medical checks in order to retain their licences. Therefore, any statements that suggest that South African regulations are inadequate in this regard are simply misleading. Pilots are expected to undergo both physical and mental fitness tests, on a regular basis. The period of the medical certificate's validity depends on the type of class of medical certificate issued; the age of the aviator and whether there are any other underlying and managed medical conditions. In this regard checks can be done on an annual basis, every six months, or even at shorter intervals, depending on the risk factors.

Operators can exceed prescribed regulations

It is worth noting that over and above the set regulations, operators such as airlines may introduce additional standards to which their employees have to adhere in order to minimise risks.

It should also be noted that the SACAA regularly gets audited by ICAO to ensure that the country's aviation industry adheres to agreed global standards. The last audit was conducted in 2013, and no single finding was issued by ICAO in relation to how South Africa regulates aviation medical matters. The SACAA is often called upon by other civil aviation authorities in Africa to assist in establishing their aviation medical departments and training.

Local medical screening tools, in the form of questionnaires contained in the Designated Aviation Medical Examiners' Guides, Aviation Medical Report forms and Civil Aviation Technical Standards, have over fifty (50) questions relating to physical, mental and behavioural conditions that licensed aviators have to clear in order to be certified as fit to perform duties. Fifteen (15) questions are specifically related to mental conditions, e.g. depression, panic attacks and anxiety as well as alcohol and substance dependence or abuse. This clearly indicates that comments that suggest that there are one or two questions pertaining to mental assessment are simply malicious.

In addition to auditing by the SACAA, operators also offer their own training on matters such as in-flight incapacitation which will assist them to identify any sudden subtle incapacitation by flight deck crew.

Enforcement action can be taken against non-compliant licence holders

Local Civil Aviation Regulations clearly state that the onus is on the licence holder to honestly disclose his or her medical conditions. In cases where it becomes apparent that the license holder has not disclosed medical conditions that could lead to incapacitation whilst performing duties; the SACAA can, and has in the past, taken legal action against such an individual. Punitive measures vary according to the severity of the offence and can also include the cancellation of a licence.

Whilst stigma may be a concern for some physical and mental conditions; it would be an exaggeration to assert that aviators generally do not disclose medical conditions that could jeopardise their jobs or result in medical unfitness. Since the introduction of some medical standards, e.g. mood disorder, there have been a number of voluntary declarations. The SACAA and the Aeromedical Committee (a committee consisting of various medical specialists, including psychiatrists and clinical psychologists, to adjudicate on aviation medical cases) often come across cases where aviators disclosed cases that could be easily stigmatised. A fair number of cases referred to the Aeromedical Committee have been ruled against aviators; but this has not stopped aviators from disclosing their illnesses. This shows a level of maturity and accountability by our aviators. However, this does not rule out the possibility that an odd licence holder may deliberately withhold information from his or her respective employer or the SACAA. We are comfortable, however, that over the years and in the future, the checks and balances in place and the collaborative effort to ensure safety in the industry, by both the Regulator and the industry employers, will assist in keeping such cases to an absolute minimum.

The SACAA further wishes to point out that in addition to continued desktop analysis, the Regulator has conducted a thorough study to assess what could be the common ailment among aviators that could lead to medical unfitness amongst aviation personnel. The eight-year comparison indicated that neurological, followed by cardiovascular and lastly psychiatric systems were some of the issues that led to medical unfitness. It is critical to note that this study was not only among pilots but also included other categories such as cabin crew, air traffic controllers and recreational pilots. Following this study, the SACAA augmented regulations and introduced initiatives to deal with these ailments. As such, local regulations and policies are informed by the outcomes of different studies.

It should be noted that the amendment of regulations is not done in isolation, but with industry role players such as pilots' associations and other industry representatives. The fact is that the SACAA continuously engages with local and international role players in order to come up with the best solutions.

New standards should be supported by scientific evidence

The SACAA has been approached by various business entities with proposals to provide solutions on various medical issues, including psychological screening tools. The decision as to whether to accept or reject proposals was based on the fact that some were not supported by research or in line with international best practices or sanctioned by local official professional bodies. The SACAA has a responsibility to ensure that any solutions introduced are not in conflict with applicable South African laws.

The SACAA is also aware that aviation medicine is a specialised service with immense potential for profitability. It would thus not be far-fetched to conclude that those with vested interest may be behind some of the malicious tales, and with the hope that the Authority would change globally accepted laws in order to favour their businesses. Overregulation is certainly not the answer to every concern, legitimate or otherwise.

A need to have a look at the flight deck composition

The recent French Alps crash has indicated the need to have a closer look at the composition of the flight deck crew. In this regard, the SACAA is engaging South African operators on their policies and procedures relating to the minimum number of crew members on the flight deck. Current Civil Aviation Regulations stipulate that the flight deck must not be left unattended at any stage of flight. Interpreted, this means that the flight deck must have a pilot at any given point during the flight. In addition to this, manufacturers also stipulate how many crew members should always be on the flight deck. The decision to exceed this requirement is left to individual operators, and therefore each operator may decide to either adhere to the aircraft manufacturer's Aircraft Operating Manual or exceed the stipulated requirement.

As a precautionary measure, South African operators have been requested to submit to the SACAA their respective risk assessment measures and the procedures that they have in place regarding the minimum number of crew on the flight deck at all stages of flight.

Based on the Regulator's assessment of the risk and mitigating factors in place, the SACAA will advise the local industry on the way forward.

Whilst the French Alps crash can be regarded as an isolated case, the Regulator is closely monitoring developments across the world in order to learn lessons and acquire principles that can be adopted to ensure heightened aviation safety and security. As always and in line with its mandate, the SACAA will continue to explore all avenues necessary to ensure that the safety and security of the civil aviation industry is upheld.

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About the SACAA:

The South African Civil Aviation Authority ("SACAA") is a juristic body established in terms of the Civil Aviation Act, 2009 (Act No. 13 of 2009) ("the Act"). SACAA is governed and controlled by the Civil Aviation Authority Board ("the Board"). In terms of mandate, the SACAA is tasked with promoting and maintaining a safe, secure and sustainable civil aviation environment, by regulating and overseeing the functioning and development of the industry in an efficient, cost-effective, and customer-friendly manner according to international standards.

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