Vignettes: The Lived Experience & Wellbeing of Aviation Workers

Introduction

These vignettes have been derived from research interviews undertaken by Dr Joan Cahill with aviation professionals.

The vignettes take as their starting point the lived experience and wellbeing of aviation workers (i.e., biopsychosocial).

In any situation, there are multiple factors and interactions. Not everything stacks up perfectly (i.e., series of holes in Reason’s Swizz cheese theory and diagram). It is essential to map the overall lived experience and sources of WRS/psychosocial hazards both in and outside work (i.e., problem space), and the core impact of this in relation to individual wellbeing, performance, and safety.

These vignettes can be used to:

- Communicate issues to decision makers and leadership (action change/prevention, addressing psychosocial hazards)
- Support problem solving re addressing wellbeing risk in SMS
- Support staff wellbeing and MH awareness/education (allows basic self-risk assessment and awareness...answer question is this me/relatability)
- Support safety promotion and health promoting workplace
- Support fostering of health, wellbeing, and safety culture

In this way, they can be linked to the 4 pillars in the SMS.

In relation to change/prevention – this needs to be addressed at different levels. Vignettes can be used to identify change requirements, as part of risk/safety management processes.
Vignette 1

**Lack of Support from Aeromedical System & Wellbeing Risk**

"It could of gase either way – nearly broken by system"  
"The regulators should facilitate the development of a 'safe harbour' for disclosing mental health problems and receiving treatment"  

**Situation 1 & Consequences**

- James, male, 45 years  
- Pilot, > 20 years experience, short range (commercial)  
- Lives with partner, mortgage, no children  
- Loves flying  
- Good health, open to talking about mental health  
- Educated on wellbeing and self-care  

**Aeromedical Exam: Discloses increased anxiety and efforts at coping**  
- Punished for being responsible and seeking help  
- Receives OMI on licence, resulting in worsening anxiety  
- Nearly ‘over the edge’  

**Resilience & coping (individual level)**

- Seeks and obtains supports from others (peer support, family)  
- Practices self-care, self-compassion and awareness  
- With support, challenges aeromedical evaluation and OMI removed  
- Job search and coaching  

**Final Outcome/Current Situation**

- Clean licence and employable (but at a cost to wellbeing)  
- Nearly ‘broken by system’  
- Has some bad days (anxiety is being managed)  
- New job – back to work – employer not aware of situation  

**Weaknesses in aeromedical system & lack of attention to wellbeing risk. What if? Consequences?**

- What if no social support/what if I did not seek support (implications: individual wellbeing)?  
- What does a 'tough day at the office' look like? (implications: performance/safety)?

**PREVENTION & CHANGE**

- Individual?  
- Organisation?  
- Aviation Regulation?  
- Health & Safety Regulation?  
- Government & Society?
Vignette 2

Fatigue & Precarious Work for Cabin Crew

“I have to take the flight work when I get it – even when I am tired”
“I can’t rely on aviation job – I have to do other work to pay the bills”
“I am constantly exhausted – thank goodness no safety issues so far”

- Vicky, female, 29 years
- Cabin Crew, > 8 years, commercial airline
- Single, no children
- Good health, open to talking about mental health
- Practices yoga and healthy lifestyle

Situation 1 & Consequences

Reduced hours/income arising from COVID

- Increased financial pressure
- COVID lockdown and social isolation
- Sleep difficulties
- Lack of support from employer
- Increased stress and anxiety (about career in aviation, job precarity etc.)

Return to Work – P/T Hours & Job Precarity

- P/T hours only, contract changes
- Unpredictable and precarious roster
- Seeks P/T work in restaurant
- Exhaustion and fatigue on job

Situation 2 & Consequences

Resilience & coping (Individual Level)

- Seeks and obtains supports from others (family)
- Practices self-care, self-compassion and awareness
- Obtains second job as waitress in city restaurant
- Second job helps with financial pressure and job uncertainty, but exhausting

Final Outcome/Current Situation

- Employer not aware of situation (i.e., two jobs and fatigue risk)
- Has presented to work, with <3 hours sleep and ‘not fit for work’
- Exhaustion is worsening her anxiety

No peer assistance for Cabin Crew. Job precarity. What if? Consequences?

- What if no social support/what if did not seek support (Implications: individual wellbeing)?
- What does a ‘tough day at the office’ look like? (Implications: performance/safety)?

Prevention & Change

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Vignette 3

Self Awareness, Disclosure & Org Wellbeing Culture

“If people have issues, they are not going to say so – they would be sent home”
“Protecting my licence – but at a cost”

- Frank, 27 years, male
- First Officer, > 5 years
- Lives with family, no children, small social network
- Not open to talking about MH & very private
- Keeps fit/healthy lifestyle

COVID: reduced hours and income, changed work terms/environment (rosters)
- Social isolation with COVID
- Job precarity and Insecurity (likelihood of new job, worsening environment/job terms)
- Sleep difficulties, social withdrawal
- Lack of support from org
- Rapid onset of serious anxiety

Situation 1 & Consequences

Resilience & coping (Individual Level)
- Not seeking support – either in work/outside work
- Not obtaining support from social network

Final Outcome/Current Situation
- Not managing health (anxiety, stress)
- Risk to wellbeing and safety
- Organisation no oversight on Frank’s wellbeing

Job precarity. Lack of support. What if?
Consequences?
- What next for wellbeing (implications: individual wellbeing)?
- Lack of reporting (implications: performance/safety)?
- Missed opportunity – avoidable situation/prevention, early intervention to address

PREVENTION & CHANGE
Vignette 4

Need to defineAME for Wellbeing Reporting - Punished for reporting Fatigue to Employer/ Airline

“If you raise too many red flags, you get a black mark by your name”

“People with black marks more likely to be selected for redundancy – trouble makers”

“Reporting fatigue in flight or citing fatigue as a reason for a near miss/safety event is a non runner - the safety manager will say you should not come to work – and file a report with the regulator (non compliance)”

Peter, male, 40 years
Captain, cargo operations, short range > 17 years,
Married, three young children (1, 3, & 5 years)
Not open to talking about mental health, prone to stress
Unhealthy diet,
Sleep issues (young children and commute to work)

Situation 1 & Consequences
Stress & WRS

Pre COVID, Safety event/landing overrun – reports ‘exhaustion’ as a contributory factor

Pressure – investigation (reporting of fitness for duty)
Worsening sleep
Increased alcohol
Increased stress and anxiety (about career in aviation, job precarity etc).

Situation 2 & Consequences
Stress & WRS

COVID, Working Reduced Hours, Extended Quarantine

Increased financial pressure & concern that will be laid off (black mark against name, given reporting)
Increased stress and anxiety (about career in aviation, job precarity etc).
Family stress – time away from home/quarantine requirements
Alcohol dependency

Seeks and obtains support from Peer Support – managing anxiety and stress
Referral to alcohol program
Addresses diet and exercise

Resilience & coping (Individual Level)

Final Outcome/Current Situation

Feels on employer blacklist re fatigue report
Continued lack of certainty re job contract and potential redundancy (managing anxiety)
Small improvements to psychological wellbeing & physical health (alcohol being managed)

Job precarity, Punished for reporting fatigue. Lack of prevention (fatigue management). What If?

What if no social support/what if did not seek support (implications: Individual wellbeing)?
Lack of reporting re fatigue (implications: performance/safety)?
Missed opportunity – improve rostering/wellbeing & preventative approach

Prevention & Change

The Four WRS Components

Individual?
Organisation?
Aviation Regulation?
Health & Safety Regulation?
Government & Society?
Vignette 5

Leadership, Culture & Change

“Leaders drive the culture and change. If our leaders do not prioritise wellbeing and are not comfortable talking about wellbeing and making changes, who will?”

Situation 1 & Consequences

- Sam, 60 years, male
- Safety Director/Accountable Post Holder, aviation company, >7 years
- Married, high stress job
- Not open to talking about MH
- Unhealthy lifestyle

Situation 2 & Consequences

COVID: increased job demands and hours, but reduced income

- New demands on job – managing safety in COVID operations, managing staff experiencing extended quarantine
- Remote work and impacts on teamwork/communication
- Lack of support from CEO in relation to terms of addressing wellbeing risks and safety implications
- Increased anxiety and stress

Safety event: Captain return to work post extended COVID quarantine, declares unfit for work post landing (runway over-run)

- Pressure from management – investigation from regulator
- Lack of support from management in terms of addressing COVID needs (wellbeing)
- Increased anxiety, not sleeping, not talking to others
- Poor communication in work (outbursts)

Resilience & coping (Individual Level)

- Awareness of need for help, but not willing to report to employer or seek help from employer
- Seeks support outside work (GP and obtains referral to counsellor)
- Reluctance to seek help within social network (partner and family)

Final Outcome/Current Situation

- Marriage breakdown
- Organisation no oversight on wellbeing and implications for decision making (strategic role & risk)

Job precarity, Lack of support. What if? Consequences?

- What next for wellbeing (implications: Individual wellbeing)?
- Lack of reporting (implications: performance/safety)?

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Vignette 6

Training Costs, Work Contracts & COVID

"1 hour contracts have replaced zero hour contracts"
"COVID has changed everything. I have lost so much"

Situation 1 & Consequences

Stress & WPS

- Richard, male, 24 years
- First Officer, <2 years, completing line training with airline, commercial operator
- Lives with family, no children
- 80K training loan to pay back
- Mild anxiety (ongoing management 10 years)

COVID: reduced hours/pay, changes in contract

- Changed work terms/environment
- Pressure to accept poor job terms, 1 hour contract (unpredictable hours), extended quarantine arrangements
- Need to complete training hours for licence
- Increased financial pressure – capacity to pay back loan
- Increased stress and anxiety

Situation 2 & Consequences

Stress & WPS

COVID: sudden bereavement in immediate family (parent)

- Bereavement
- Lack of support – coping with loss (employer)
- Emotional and physical fatigue (roster that suits airline, standbys, no certainty)
- Onset of severe depression, coupled with anxiety

Resilience & coping (Individual level)

- Reduced ability of family to provide support (bereavement)
- Contacts airline PPS – obtains support and referral for counselling
- PPS requests referral for aeromedical assessment (rated at risk/exceptional circumstances)
- Not seeking help within airline (job uncertainty/licence/stigma)

Final Outcome/Current Situation

- Awaiting assessment: serious anxiety relating to assessment of professionals (aeromedical & licence)
- Worsening health (depression + anxiety)
- Airline not aware of MH risk

Job precarious. Lack of support. No AMC for wellbeing. What if? Consequences?

- What next for wellbeing (implications: individual wellbeing)?
- Lack of reporting (implications: performance/safety)?

PREVENTION & CHANGE

The Four PPS Components

- Individual?
- Organisation?
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