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> It's In The Air We Breathe

By Bearnairdine Baumann
former Lufthansa Purser

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„In 1977 a 34 year old, previously healthy military navigator on-duty in a Lockheed C-130 Hercules military transport aircraft suddenly felt very ill, so much so that he became incapacitated. It turned out that he and the other crew members had experienced acute intoxication following inhalation of vaporized lubricating oil which had contaminated the breathing air in the cockpit. He experienced neurological impairment and gastrointestinal distress and “by the time the plane landed, he had difficulty standing.”

„1977 - Allergic rhinitis, conjunctivitis, and asthma have been reported following human exposure to pyrethrins. Rare but potentially severe reactions following direct dermal or respiratory exposure to pyrethrins include hypersensitivity pneumonitis, and nonfatal and fatal anaphylactic reactions (Carlson, 1977)“.

> fyi: Pyrethrins are the active ingredient in desinsection sprays used on board.<

After 16 years on Boeing I changed over to Airbus fleet in 1993. My health had become increasingly fragile over the past few years. Practically monthly flu-like colds that took ages to heal, chronic fatigue, skin irritation, hair loss, headaches, balance problems, dizzy spells and bronchial asthma. On a spring day four years after starting on Airbus, I checked-in for duty on a rotation which was covering two to four legs per - never suspecting it was to be my last sign-in! On the last leg of that day to Moscow,

we experienced a strong acrid, smelly socks smell and a 'fire' warning. The alarm went off and red lights were blinking in the cockpit, the pilots donned their masks and went in to their emergency check-list mode, and the captain quickly told me that we should search for fire or smoke, touch toilet doors and walls for heat – but we found nothing. After a while, everything settled, and the flight continued without further interruption; we landed and went to our hotel. But, nobody suggested we meet up as we usually did, all of us said we were too tired. Several of us complained about headaches and two girls looked very pale and drawn. The next day we had the same aircraft on our four hour flight back. Just after takeoff, invisible, but clearly toxic smelling fumes enveloped us. Looking over my shoulder in to the cockpit I saw that the pilots had their masks on again and was wondering what on earth was going on?

A few minutes in to climb to cruising altitude I had a throbbing headache and my neck felt oddly stiff. I had palpitations that reached my throat, and glancing at my colleague beside me, I noticed that she was looking very pale and she moaned with a blank stare that she felt really ill. Then, I got a call from the aft galley for help. I rushed to the back, only to find one of the girls virtually hanging in her seat belts on the jump seat. I grabbed a few tissues and tried to cool her forehead with cold water; her lips looked blue, so I got the medical oxygen bottle out for her. The other girl seemed to be OK and said she'd look after her. I walked to the front galley on now slightly unsteady legs that felt like rubber; as I got there I noted the co-pilot come out of the washroom looking very pale – and then, without warning, I was violently sick – I just about made it to the waste trolley.

The next day I had to ask for a stand-by purser to replace me. The girl who

was so sick the day before, had left for home directly after the passengers had disembarked, the others said they'd manage. I tried one more leg, but it was not possible. Completely off balance and unable to work, my crew sat me down for the remainder of the flight, commenting on how ill I looked. My head was pounding, I felt dizzy, I couldn't think straight or concentrate and felt nauseated. After lying for over two hours in the airport's emergency room waiting for the dizziness and the pressure in the brain to pass, I dead-headed back home – by train .

Two hours later, I was relieved to have made it back to base, but couldn't remember where I had parked my car. I always wrote the parking spot in my note book, but did not remember that! After staggering more than walking along row after row of cars for what seemed like ages, I found it. Driving slowly, I was nearly home, when I realized that I had no clue how I had managed to get there; next thing, I had to stop the car abruptly because I felt so weak and dizzy and so very fatigued with eyes so heavy, as if covered with a lid of lead, that they kept closing. Somehow I just fell asleep right after managing to stop at the side of the road. I woke some time later, I had no idea how long I had slept; or if, indeed, it was a sleep and not a fainting; my hands and legs were tingling and felt numb. I was hardly able to think; I tried to figure out what had happened. Through the brain fog I was wondering what the heck I was doing at the side of the road, only 2km from home. I sat for a while staring at the steering wheel; then I remembered that I had to start the engine by turning the key, but kept groping for it on the wrong side of the wheel. With a shaking, numb hand I finally found the key and after several attempts turned it in the right direction – but, then I couldn't get the car to move, until I realized that I was pressing down on the brakes instead

of the accelerator. I couldn't feel my feet left from right, and my head and heart were pounding non-stop. My face was burning and I realized I was sobbing. I was so tired and frustrated and ... afraid. Willing myself mentally, thinking of my Dad who always said: "You can do it!", and concentrating really hard, forcing my eyes to stay open, I drove very slowly and finally managed to get home. I left my flight-kit, suitcase and everything else in the car, staggered inside and fell on my bed still in uniform ... to wake up twelve hours later ...

I was diagnosed by three experts AND the airlines' flight medic, with a „Chronic poisoning by chemicals present on aircraft, respiratory problems, and allergic bronchial asthma caused by the inhalation of toxic fumes“. So, after over 20 years of flying, several fume events and exposure to constant low-level contamination of a combination of substances every time I was on-board, I was signed off as „Unfit to Fly“ with an un-ceremonial: good-bye.

My health improved again, but it took a long time and a lot of work. Some years later I flew as a passenger and got in to a fume event after landing. All symptoms came back with a vengeance and worse than ever! This is called an acute-on-chronic exposure reaction to poisoning by toxic substances, and known by toxicologists and neurologists that it can make matters worse – dormant symptoms are re-activated instantly. The air during the event smelled strongly of kerosene and oil fumes, loaded in part with highly toxic carbon-monoxide. Why that event happened is described in my book 'The Air I Breathe- It's Classified' (German version: Höhenluft-Tagebuch einer Stewardess).

I was very sick after that for several years. Further diagnostics mention "severe neurological brain injury" from exposure to organophosphates, some of which are present in the engine oils. The cocktail of insecticides, fugitive oil emissions from bleed-air and other pyrolysed engine fluids and VOC's is a big health concern: it is known that combinations of substances can cause even more toxic chemical reactions.

However, not everybody has the same sensitivity. Just like one person can smoke three packs of cigarettes a day and still live to a ripe old age and not get lung cancer or has only minor health problems, the next person can react to just the presence of cigarette smoke (secondary smoke inhalation) and have health issues. Many may remain unharmed after exposure to acute fume events and even have no issues after long term low level exposure to the toxic residue-cocktail which remains stuck and active up to over 50 days in the carpets, seats and on aircraft walls. Yet again others can become severely ill after just one fume incident. Symptoms can happen within minutes, others after hours, yet again more days or even weeks later. If you notice a slow buildup of strange ill-health, that you have 'allergies', that you can't even tolerate a glass of wine anymore, have headaches and are inexplicably ill-tempered, sleep badly and are fatigued to the core – you should consider increased "toxic body burden" and mention that to your doctor.

My appeal is to all those lucky ones who have no problems, to respect those who do and to not ridicule them, not doubt them, but to take them and the toxic-air problem seriously. It is a known 'elephant in the room' and it is known since over 60 years. There is finally some activity within the industry, but it is slow and there is still too much of the denial going on.

"We are looking for tombstones!" The chilling message, sent in an email memo by a long-serving senior employee working for aircraft giant Boeing, warned.

He said they would be "looking for a tombstone" unless they tackled the potentially deadly health and safety issue on board passenger planes, but worried at the same time, that „before anyone with horsepower will do anything about it“ a disaster had to happen. He complained that he and other engineers had been given the "run around" over their fears. The engineer was so worried about the risk to passengers and crew on board Boeing's airplanes, he told bosses he was amazed air safety regulators were not taking stronger action.

He pointed out in the email that Boeing was fully aware of the issue and that some of the events that had been witnessed, including blue smoke circulating above passengers' heads, were "significant".

This email was sent in 2007 – the warning words echo ever since hauntingly throughout the media." (excerpt from my new book coming soon).

Above quote/original email, up-to-date science, time-line, evidence and testimonies from many, many colleagues can be viewed at www.aerotoxicteam.com:

Unable to work, outfitted with a lot of willpower and making strict life style changes, including moving to a secluded area in the Alps for the fresh air, my health is slowly, slowly improving again. Some symptoms I am told, will remain.

Wishing you always happy, healthy and fume-free flights.

I do so miss flying!
Bearnardine

More information can be found:

Aerotoxic Team:
www.aerotoxicteam.com

Plane Holistic Health:
www.planeholistichealth.com

YouTube Channel:
Aerotoxic Syndrome (Aerotoxic Team)