

Accidents and Incidents Involving Alcohol and Drugs in Australian Civil Aviation: 1 January 1975 to 31 March 2006

Drug and alcohol use in pilots can have a detrimental impact on aviation safety. Important cognitive and psychomotor functions necessary for safe operation of an aircraft can be significantly impaired by drugs and alcohol. The purpose of this study was to determine the prevalence and nature of drug and alcohol-related accidents and incidents in Australian civil aviation. A search of the Australian Transport Safety Bureau's accident and incident database was conducted for all occurrences in which drugs or alcohol were recorded between 1 January 1975 and 31 March 2006. There were 36 drug and alcohol-related events (31 accidents and five incidents). The majority of these occurrences were related to alcohol (22 occurrences). The drugs identified included prescription drugs, over-the-counter medications and illegal drugs (including heroin and cannabis). Drug and alcohol events accounted for only 0.02 per cent of all the occurrences listed on the Australian Transport Safety Bureau's database. Drug and alcohol-related accidents accounted for 0.4 per cent of all accidents. Furthermore, 89 per cent of drug and alcohol occurrences resulted in an accident, with the proportion of these 32 occurrences that resulted in an accident quite high, at 86.5 per cent. Fatal accidents accounted for 67 per cent of all drug and alcohol occurrences. The results of this study show that the prevalence of drug and alcohol-related accidents and incidents in Australian civil aviation is very low, but that the related accident and fatality rates are high. The planned introduction of a mandatory drug and alcohol testing program into the Australian civil aviation industry will provide a more prescriptive approach to the issue of drug and alcohol use in pilots. Education and training remain important elements of an overall approach to reducing the significant impact of drug and alcohol use on flight safety.

Full report available from http://www.atsb.gov.au/publications/2006/b20060169_001.aspx