

A Real Cure for Driver Fatigue

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While the focus on truck driver safety aims primarily at regulating hours of work and rest, at least one fleet is targeting a more likely culprit in fatigue-related accidents: sleep apnea. It's a disorder that is more prevalent in long-haul truck drivers than the general population. It's also frequently misdiagnosed.

Sleep apnea is a condition in which the back of the throat is obstructed, restricting oxygen flow. Sufferers tend to snore loudly and are rarely able to get restful, restorative sleep, no matter what their sleeping conditions. Obviously, it leads directly to fatigue.

A truck driver suffering with the condition is at high risk due to erratic work schedules, long trips and less than optimum sleeping conditions in the back of a truck cab parked at a truckstop or rest area.

Government and trucking industry studies indicate that 28% of the nation's 17 million truck drivers are at risk for this potentially deadly disease.

Undiagnosed driver victims pose a highway safety risk – as much as seven times higher than drivers without sleep apnea.

Those statistics got the attention of management at Schneider National, the big truckload carrier that employs more than 15,000 drivers.

While driver demographics and lifestyles play a role in development of sleep apnea, Schneider felt that clearly, a medical solution was needed.

The company reviewed medical records of unemployed drivers who had non-work-related illnesses. They discovered a revealing fact: A large percentage of those drivers suffered from sleep apnea.

In 2006, Schneider took a revolutionary step, launching a sleep apnea detection and treatment program in partnership with Precision Pulmonary Diagnostics, a Houston-based company that provides sleep apnea solutions for commercial trucking firms. They began by surveying more than 8,000 drivers during one of the company's two annual mandatory training sessions.

The screening tool was designed by PPD and developed with cross checks to prevent inclusion of inaccurate data. It pinpointed which drivers were most at



**Schneider
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results.**

risk for developing sleep apnea. In their two initial efforts they found groups of 339 and 778 drivers who suffered from it.

The next step was implementing a treatment program. Schneider pays all testing and treatment costs and works with drivers to teach them the proper use of equipment – a mask and machine that regulate air flow as they sleep – to mitigate the effects of the disorder.

Those actions helped remove driver reluctance to seek diagnosis and cure. Often, they fear they could lose their jobs if they are found to have sleep apnea. And while the disorder is relatively simple to treat, diagnosis and treatment can be costly for the individual.

Schneider is now treating an average of 50 to 70 drivers each month. To date, they have treated over 1,600 drivers. The benefits so far are remarkable.

Since inception, the program has reduced health care costs per treated driver by between \$500 and \$708 per month. The fleet's health care claims have been halved, and health care costs are down 58%. Schneider realized a 30% reduction in frequency of driver fatigue-related accidents and vehicle and property damage and cargo claims dropped 48%.

Another side benefit: a 1.9 times improvement in retention among Schneider drivers treated for sleep apnea. Management feels that's related to drivers being more satisfied with their employer and therefore less willing to change jobs.

Precision Pulmonary Diagnostics (PPD), the company implementing the Schneider program, was founded in 2005 by sleep specialist Mark B. Berger, M.D. PPD specializes in patent-pending programs to allow administration of employer-driven sleep apnea programs that include web-based screening tools, diagnosis, treatment and monitoring. For more information, visit www.precisionpulmonary.com.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Deborah Whistler".

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