

# Hundreds of pilots unfit to fly

Shayne Currie

A FLIGHT safety row is escalating, with revelations that more than 400 pilots were declared unfit to fly last year.

Of those, 72 were permanently grounded.

The figures, released to the *Sunday Star-Times* by the Civil Aviation Authority, represent a massive increase – more than double the numbers of previous years.

Among the pilots were some who flew for airlines and health worries included bad eyesight and hearing, depression and heart problems.

The revelations are the latest development in a bitter dispute between the CAA and the aviation industry over the way medical certificates for pilots are issued.

A CAA-commissioned review, released last week, described the system as “dangerously defective”.


It found the doctors who issued the certificates had an unacceptable clerical, procedural and clinical error rate.

The CAA said it was surprised at the surge in the number of pilots found to be unfit but said it might be because doctors were enforcing standards more rigorously.

CAA spokesman Martyn Gosling said of the 72 pilots found to be permanently unfit, 22 held professional pilot licences – they could be airline pilots and others who flew commercially. Another 41 had non-professional licences and nine held air traffic controllers’ licences.

Pilot groups insisted there were no flight safety concerns. They said doctors were being stricter on pilots because they were being forced to follow the CAA’s “draconian” policies and were terrified of legal action. Many pilots were being grounded unnecessarily and forced into expensive tests.

Air Line Pilots Association medical and welfare director



	Unfit	Permanently Unfit	Total
1996	55	133	188
1997	51	122	173
1998	45	156	201
1999	35	163	198
2000	72	343	415

Source: CAA

Dave Earle said the so-called huge safety issue was “a load of codswallop”.

Earle rejected suggestions it was good luck rather than good management that there had been no major accident caused by a pilot’s health problems.

No airline pilot had been incapacitated in flight in the past 20 years, he said.

“Pilots are route checked annually. Another pilot is flying alongside, making sure they are flying according to the book.

“They are making sure

they are standard and safe.” However, he believed “a large chunk” of the increase would be stress-related and fatigue problems caused by heavier workloads since the Employment Contracts Act was introduced.

In those cases, pilots were recognising the conditions themselves and advising doctors before it became a

problem, he said.

Earle was critical of the CAA, saying its own review had shown doctors had not been properly audited by the authority for six years from 1992. He believed CAA director Kevin Ward should go.

The CAA was trying to cover up its mistakes by panicking the minister of transport into making legislative changes to give it draconian powers. “If these bureaucrats were pilots, then we would have something to worry about. They are panic artists.”

The review found the CAA

had inadequate powers to regulate the medical assessment of pilots and inadequate medical resources.

One of its most stunning revelations was that some aviation doctors were admitted to the system despite not meeting the CAA’s criteria – they were given help to pass exams because some questions were deemed too difficult.

Ward told the *Star-Times* he was not in a good position to talk about the whys and wherefores of that. It was “news to me” and the people involved were no longer with the CAA, he said.

“That is not the standard of behaviour I would expect of the CAA... I was surprised and disappointed to find that.”

The CAA had suspended one doctor but Ward refused to say what action, if any, it had taken against other medical practitioners. On audited files, the review found error rates of between 21% and 86%. One assessor could not read an ECG heart machine

chart. Ward said that situation had been covered and was no longer a risk.

He did not believe there were pilots flying with problems that needed immediate attention. There might be some with “moderate or trivial” problems and they would be picked up.

He rejected as “absolutely absurd” suggestions that the release of the review was to head off High Court action by the aviation industry.

A forum of seven aviation organisations – representing almost the entire industry – have united to pursue changes to the CAA rules through the courts.

A judicial conference in the High Court at Wellington has been set down for Tuesday.

Included in the disputed rules is a CAA procedure to medically test “at risk” pilots for heart attacks.

A “fighting fund” to support the action by the aviation industry has reached more than \$60,000.