

Karen Coleman: Longer hours for pilots will raise concerns for safety

By [Karen Coleman](#)

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THE recent blast of sunny weather may have set you dreaming of your summer holidays or fantasising about a weekend break to a fun European city.

If you're tempted to take off, one of the first things you'll do is book your flights and you'll probably expect to get them at affordable prices. The advent of budget airlines has made us all used to flying around the continent inexpensively.

Most of us assume that we'll arrive safely at our destinations. But those assumptions may be foolish. In fact, we could be risking our lives for the sake of cheap flights.

Just read the following statement for a wake-up call.

"Two million people across Europe will today board a flight. When they do so, they will put their lives in the hands of others. How safe would they feel if they knew their pilots were falling asleep at the controls?"

That stark declaration is quoted in a booklet produced by the safety and technical committee of the Irish Airline Pilots' Association (IALPA). It is packed with spine-chilling facts about the dangers of pilots falling asleep in the cockpit. Some of its information would make you think twice about boarding a plane.

The document refers to recent studies of pilots in Norway and Denmark, which found that around 50pc had "fallen asleep without informing their colleague" and that 40pc of the pilots had reported being "involved in serious incidents as a result of fatigue".

It gets worse.

IALPA quotes a 2011 study of a major UK airline, conducted by the University College of London. UCL sent out questionnaires on flight safety to pilots working for the airline. Of the 492 replies, 45pc said they were suffering from "clinically relevant levels of fatigue" and a similar proportion felt that "their abilities were compromised by fatigue in flight more than once a month".

There's a reason why all this alarming information is being published right now.

IALPA is campaigning against new European proposals to increase flight duty hours, which it says could cause fatal airline crashes due to pilot fatigue. More than 500 people have been killed in plane crashes worldwide because of pilot fatigue since 1993, according to IALPA.

The pilots are busy lobbying various political and European institutions to stop the new rules from becoming law.

The proposals are coming from the European Aviation Safety Agency, which is responsible for overseeing airline safety in Europe. EASA wants to increase the number of "flight duty" hours in any one day from 13 to 14, with the potential to extend that to 16 hours at the "commander's discretion".

That might not seem like such a risky increase, but according to the pilots, it could be fatal. They say it could tip pilots into a state of fatigue, with the potential to jeopardise passenger safety.

"If the rules that are proposed are passed, the number of fatigued pilots will increase, therefore the number of incidents and serious accidents will increase and people will die," says Captain Paul Cullen, director of safety and technical officer of IALPA.

EASA vigorously disputes the pilots' claims and insists that its proposals will not compromise safety. In a statement, it said it wanted to reduce the number of hours that pilots can fly for certain starting times, especially at night, and stated that its proposals would encourage airlines "to spread out the working times for pilots more evenly".

However, Captain Cullen contests those declarations. He claims that EASA's proposals will compromise flight safety, particularly when it comes to pilots on standby duty, who could end up landing a plane 20 hours after originally reporting for work.

He outlined the following scenario. A pilot in Dublin might get up at 5am for standby duty in Dublin Airport at 6am. He may have to hang around the airport for several hours before being rostered onto a flight.

During that rest period, the pilot is supposed to be able to sleep in a private room without distractions. But, according to Captain Cullen, that pilot will be wide awake, having had eight hours' sleep the previous night.

After a lengthy "rest period" the pilot could then be told he is flying to Warsaw and that his flight duty will begin at noon. Captain Cullen says the pilot could then fly from Dublin to Warsaw and back again to Dublin.

He could then take off for another European destination, before finally touching down again at Dublin Airport at around 2am. By then, he will be landing a plane full of passengers after 21 hours on the go.

CAPTAIN Cullen admits that this scenario would not be a frequent occurrence but he claims that a pilot could potentially find himself in that situation every one to three months. Furthermore, he says the pressure on pilots has increased enormously since the advent of low-cost flying and that pilots working for budget airlines are under pressure to extend their flight-duty hours to the maximum possible.

"Captains have been sanctioned for not extending their duties, for not using their own discretion," he said.

IALPA has accused EASA of pandering to the airline industry and introducing proposals that will increase airline profits and potentially put passengers at risk. Needless to say, EASA strongly disagrees.

It insists that a range of people, from crew and airline representatives to aviation officials, have been involved in drafting up the new proposals, which it contends are balanced.

As for the airline industry, Ryanair says it doesn't support the proposed changes to the current flight-time limitations.

However, in a statement, its chief of communications, Stephen McNamara, condemned "the silly, self-serving union scaremongering on the issue". He said the current regulations "limit pilots to an average of just 18 hours flying per week" and that the pilots were "more likely to suffer from boredom than fatigue".

It's difficult to know who to believe when you hear such conflicting views from the various players in the airline industry.

But there's one thing these polarised opinions do highlight -- we need much more clarity and open public discussion on these proposed changes to ensure that we can all feel that bit safer in the future.

- Karen Coleman