

Tragic Example of Possible Consequences of 'Presenteeism'



If workers are very busy or afraid of appearing replaceable, they may come to work even when they're sick. Although they may expect praise for being so diligent and devoted to their jobs, employers should actually encourage workers to stay home when they're not feeling well.

In addition to exposing their co-workers to contagious illnesses, sick workers may not operate at the top of their abilities and may find their judgment and responses are impaired.

An incident in the Northwest Territories is an example of the tragic consequences that so-called 'presenteeism' can have. (Read more about the impact of 'presenteeism' on the workplace.)

According to a report by the Transportation Safety Board of Canada, a pilot crashed a float plane on his way to Ivanhoe Lake. He was the only occupant and died from his injuries.

Transwest's policy is that if pilots feel unfit to fly due to illness, they're expected to contact the base manager, chief pilot or director of flight operations and remove themselves from flight duty. The pilot would still be paid for a sick day.

The TSB investigation found that the night before the crash, the pilot had shared a meal with a fellow pilot and then went to bed. The next morning, he experienced stomach cramps and was feeling unwell. But he never reported his illness as per the policy.

During the course of the day and while at a stop for maintenance, the pilot complained of an upset stomach. He turned down offers of lunch and ate a few crackers instead. Although normally described as happy and relaxed, that day, the pilot appeared increasingly agitated, withdrawn and short-tempered.

At the time of the crash, the pilot had been on duty for almost 12 hours and was on the 13th flight of 15 that were planned for the day. And except for two brief periods, the flying duties had been continuous and didn't include a rest period.

A number of factors were present that would've reduced the pilot's ability to cope with the stressors and make safe decisions, including his fatigue combined with illness, anger, heavy workload, time pressure and an incident in which a wing of the plane struck a tree. As a result, the pilot made an unsafe decision to depart with a damaged, uninspected aircraft, concluded the TSB.

Bottom line: Sick workers may make unsafe decisions that could result in harm to themselves and/or others. So require and encourage workers to stay home when they're not feeling well.