



KNOW YOUR MEDICAL: THE MOOD DISORDER PROTOCOL

Up until about 7 years ago, if you were diagnosed as suffering from depression and prescribed anti-depressants, you were pretty much stuffed. There was no protocol for pilots or crew to fly under these circumstances, and the individual was grounded until such time as he or she came off the medication, or threw in the towel and found a new career.

In those days there were four options: 1. Continue flying undiagnosed and unmedicated; 2. Continue flying, obtain medication on the sly and fly illegally; 3. Get a formal diagnosis and treatment and remain grounded until off the medication; or 4. Give up flying. Who would you rather have: a pilot being treated and medicated, or an untreated depressed individual flying your family?

Then along came the Mood Disorder Protocol, which is quite a progressive protocol in terms of world standards. It has been a godsend for pilots suffering from anxiety, depression and PTSD. What it boils down to is that aircrew are now able to resume their flying careers after diagnosis.

Let me outline the basics of it:

If you are suffering from depression, in terms of the CAR you must ground yourself and report the condition to your DAME. Ask your DAME for a referral to a psychiatrist who has a knowledge of aviation, if possible, otherwise get a referral from your GP.

Print out and take along the Mood Disorder Protocol to your first appointment with the psychiatrist. The doctor will need to know what medications can be used to treat your depression and still allow you to continue with your career.

Please don't be under the impression that your depression will be "cured" after taking the first pill. Everyone is different, but it can take weeks and sometimes months for the anti-depressants to take effect. Quite often patients are prescribed anti-anxiety medication in the beginning stages of treatment, but this medication won't be prescribed long term as it is addictive. Also, you most certainly cannot fly on anti-anxiety medication!

The protocol stipulates an initial grounding period of at least 3 months. This is to ensure that the medication has had adequate time to take effect, and also for possible suicidal thoughts to be resolved.

You will also need to consult with a psychologist, and please note that the protocol states a CLINICAL psychologist, not a counselling psychologist. It is quite handy find a practise where the psychiatrist and the psychologist work together, as they can co-ordinate their efforts in bringing you back to health. Both of them will be required to submit reports, and it is essential that they both have the same diagnosis, as a differing diagnosis on the reports will be a stumbling block in getting your medical back.

Once you have been symptom and side-effect free for a period of at least 4 weeks, you can begin the process of applying for recertification. Your case will have to be presented at the Aeromedical Panel.

Ask your psychiatrist for a report detailing the diagnosis, the length and course of your treatment, including type and dosage of anti-depressant, and any side effects that were experienced, and stating that you are now side-effect free. Additionally, you will need to complete the HAMD 17 (Hamilton Depression Scale) which is a requirement of the protocol. The report will need to include a HAMD score on diagnosis, and a current HAMD score of consistently less than 7. You will also need to supply a clinical psychologist's report, indicating much the same as the report above.

Take all of the reports etc to your DAME, who will submit them to the CAA for consideration at the next Aeromedical Panel. Being granted permission to fly on the protocol comes with some restrictions, not least of which is being restricted to multi-crew flying only. These are:

First six months - monthly psychiatrist report

Then a follow up at nine months, then another at 12 months, and thereafter at 6 monthly intervals.

If at any time your psychiatrist changes your medication or dosage, you will have to be booked off flying until such time as you are symptom and side-effect free on the new medication or dosage.

If you come off the medication, and have a subsequent episode of depression, you will be disqualified from flying, so the best suggestion is if you go on anti-depressants, stay on them for the rest of your career.