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Trucking Headlines

FMCSA advisers want apnea testing

By Jill Dunn

The Medical Review Board of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration has recommended that CDL holders with a body mass index of 30 or higher be referred for sleep apnea testing. An agency spokesman emphasized it is only a recommendation.

The FMCSA has the choice of acting on such recommendations in whole, in part or not at all, and there is no timetable for such responses, said Duane DeBruyne, FMCSA deputy director. Moreover, anything the agency pursues would have to go through a formal process of publication and public comment, DeBruyne said.

The board voted 4-1 for the recommendation at its Jan. 28 meeting, minutes of which were not approved until April 7.

Sleep apnea is a serious disorder that interrupts a person's breathing during sleep. People with untreated sleep apnea stop breathing repeatedly while sleeping. Besides sleeplessness and fatigue, sleep apnea can cause excessive snoring, acid reflux and other health problems, and it can aggravate any existing heart or lung trouble.

Certain physical features, such as excessive weight, are common to people with sleep apnea, although people who aren't obese can suffer it as well. A BMI of 30 or greater – 220 pounds for a 6-foot-tall person – puts people at risk for developing obesity-related medical conditions such as sleep apnea. Nearly a third of Americans are obese.

At the Jan. 28 meeting, board member Dr. Barbara Phillips called the BMI cutoff point a “contentious issue for the board and its Sleep Apnea Medical Expert Panel.”

Another board member, Dr. Matthew Rizzo, said he objected to the recommendation because of the clear relationship between sleep apnea and BMI, noting that BMI alone may be a risk factor for crashes.

Proper treatment will lead to significant health-care savings for fleets, but the cost of tests and treatment is not inconsiderable, said Wendy Sullivan, former occupational health manager for Schneider National. Schneider requires mandatory testing and compliance monitoring for sleep apnea, and more than 1,900 of its drivers have been treated for it.