TOXIC CABIN AIR CAMPAIGNERS CALL FOR DETECTORS IN PLANES

News / Airlines



An unexplained incident that forced a plane to land after six people fell ill has led campaigners to call for toxic air detectors to be installed in cabins.

The captain of an American Airlines flight to Los Angeles returned to land at Heathrow after two passengers and some flight attendants complained of light headedness.

American Airlines said a subsequent investigation found no evidence of air toxicity but the carrier replaced all of the air filters on the aircraft “out of an abundance of caution.”

“The aircraft landed safely,” said an American Airlines spokesman, “where it was met by paramedics who evaluated passengers and crew. None requested further medical attention. Our maintenance team conducted a thorough inspection of the aircraft, including a test flight, and found no issues with the Boeing 777-300.”

he incident has prompted campaigners to call for a public inquiry into damage caused to cabin crew by something called ‘aerotoxic syndrome’, which they claim is an illness caused by breathing in fumes on a plane that have been contaminated with engine oil and other toxic chemicals.

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The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) maintains however that incidents of smoke or fumes on aircraft are rare and that there is no evidence of negative long-term health effects.

Richard Westgate died in 2012 after claiming he had been poisoned by toxic cabin fumes

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Richard Westgate died in 2012 after claiming he had been poisoned by toxic cabin fumes Photo: Cascade

Death of a pilot

But last February, a coroner investigating the death of British Airways pilot Richard Westgate ruled that fumes circulating in planes posed “consequential damage” to the health of frequent fliers and crew.

Mr Westgate died in 2012 after claiming he had been poisoned by toxic cabin fumes. The report of Stanhope Payhne, the senior coroner for Dorset, called on British Airways and the CAA to take “urgent action to prevent future deaths”.

The report led Unite to call for a public inquiry into the health effects of “fume events”. Today, the union renewed its campaign for people affected by aerotoxic syndrome. “The aviation industry simply cannot continue to ignore the clamour for action,” a spokesman said.

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Unite said it is now pursuing 60 legal cases of individuals who have symptoms consistent with the syndrome, as well as a deceased cabin crew member.

“The technology behind the circulation of air within aircraft has not moved on much at all since the 1950s,” Howard Beckett, Unite’s legal director said, “meaning that fume events are happening with regularity. Repeated exposure to these `events’ is what we believe leads to aerotoxic syndrome –

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so we say to the industry, sort this out because people are being put at risk.”

New technology promises new air filters

The way in which air is circulated around a plane cabin is beginning to change thanks to new technology, such as that used in Boeing’s recent Dreamliner planes.

When commercial flights began in 1958 passengers breathed in air supplied directly from the atmosphere using compressors.

But this was deemed to be too expensive, so in 1962 a system was installed to draw the air from the heart of the engines — known today as “bleed” air.

• The world's safest - and least safe - airlines revealed

The vast majority of commercial passenger planes being flown today use the "bleed air" system. Air is drawn out of the compression section of the engine and cooled. It then enters the cabin, where it mixes with recirculated air that has passed through filters designed to remove bacteria and viruses. These “recirculated air” filters do not remove any fumes or vapours from the engine. So if engine oil or hydraulic fuel leaks, because of poorly designed or faulty seals, or even over-filled tanks, toxic chemicals can contaminate the air supply.

In contrast, Boeing’s new Dreamliner pumps fresh cabin air from a separate source (away from the engines) for the first time since the Fifties.

The case for installing air quality detectors

Former British Airways captain, Tristan Loraine, also campaigns about ‘aerotoxic syndrome’. He claims his medical certificate to fly was revoked by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) due to his exposure to contaminated air.

He cannot understand why a recommendation of the Air Accident Investigation Board (AAIB) that planes be fitted with air monitoring and warning systems has not been acted upon.

“In your house you will have a fire detector and a carbon monoxide detector,” he said, “you will find air quality detectors in mines, submarines and space craft – in any enclosed space where you can’t simply open the door – but not planes. I personally think it’s because the air industry won’t like what they find.”

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