

Your Health, Your Career

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The American trucker is once again being singled out to be further regulated; again this time for health reasons. The FMCSA has received recommendations from the Medical Review Board that all CDL holders be subjected to a comprehensive “matrix” of health questions. If adopted into the rules, these recommendations could remove hundreds if not thousands of drivers from the road.

Fitness for duty matrix

The rule would require drivers who have either a condition or meet one of a long list of medical criteria to increase their DOT physicals or be barred from driving altogether.

The matrix would punish drivers who exhibit more than one of the following conditions:

- diabetes (medicinally treated)
- cardiovascular disease
- hypertension
- disrhythmias
- obstructive sleep apnea
- a Body Mass Index of 35 or greater (a 5-foot-8 inch tall male weighing 230 pounds has a BMI of 35)
- opioid or benzodiazepine use
- renal disease
- pulmonary disease
- epilepsy
- musculoskeletal disease requiring medical surgical or prosthetic treatment
- requirement for visual exemption (vision not meeting 20-40 after corrective lenses)
- major psychiatric illness
- “Other conditions as identified by FMCSA”

While the agency has not acted on the board’s fitness for duty matrix recommendation as of yet, with all of the focus recently on the health of drivers, it is most likely just a matter of time. It will have impact even before being adopted into the rule as doctors, who are afraid of being sued if an accident involving a truck driver they have certified occurs, will follow the recommendations even if the recommendations are not yet rules.

The Medical Review Board voted on recommending the matrix after only 10 minutes of discussion. At this time, there are no studies linking a truck driver’s health to any crash related incidents. The matrix recommendation in itself is vague using words such as “may”. “Drivers who are not fit may present a safety hazard to themselves and to the public,” or “physical and mental disorders may reduce driver performance and increase the risk of crashes.”

With the accident rates falling, and the overwhelming data that state that 75% of the time a crash is not the fault of the truck driver, one must wonder why this matrix is being recommended. Could it be a money trail? A DOT physical can cost up to \$150.00. With the matrix requiring drivers with some conditions to have 2 or more physicals a year, this could or ‘may’ if you prefer, make doctors and clinics thousands of dollars in extra revenue a year without taking into consideration things such as expensive sleep studies and other tests required that would generate even more revenue. A definite statement would be in the advent of the matrix becoming a rule, “truckers will have to spend thousands of dollars to keep their jobs.” Somebody will get rich, but not the trucker.

This matrix recommendation follows on the heels of the BMI linked mandatory sleep study testing recommendation that the Medical Review Board suggested last year. Dr. Barbara Phillips, a Medical Review Board member is immediate past chairman of both the FMCSA board and the National Sleep Foundation. The National Sleep Foundation is an association funded largely by drug companies, sleep study labs and C-Pap manufacturers. Is there any wonder that the Medical Review Board keeps coming up with these types of recommendations?

While doctors are an important factor in any type of medically related regulation, a level playing field with both sides being represented would be fair to both sides. At this time, this is not the case. The Medical Review Board is made up of five doctors with no one representing the interests of truckers or the trucking industry. OOIDA executives and trucking radio talk show host Dave Nemo have made a recommendation to the FMCSA to include Dr. John McElligott, who started the Professional Drivers Medical Depot Clinics, on the FMCSA Medical Review Board; the FMCSA has yet to invite Dr. McElligott to the board.

Many drivers have driven millions of miles in their careers safely and while having some of the conditions cited in the matrix. These conditions are either unknown or treated by the drivers and their family doctors. These same drivers may have no other careers available to them or be near to retirement. If this matrix is put into the rules, these same drivers will stand to lose their homes and in some cases everything else they own. Instead of punishing drivers who have physical conditions, identifying the conditions and getting the driver treated would be a more fair approach than making the driver give up their career.

With thousands of drivers out of work due to the economy and the economy still failing, it does not make sense for anyone to continue to work towards putting more drivers out of work. This is obviously senseless as there are no scientific studies to warrant any strengthening of the already in place medical requirements. This is once again part of a larger, behind the scenes effort to further damage the image of the American trucker and to further someone's agenda. I for one, wish they would stop and allow us drivers to do our jobs as we always have done safely and productively to keep this country supplied.