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Making UK roads safer - RAC supports fast-tracking of sleep disorder treatment

A campaign has been launched that aims to reduce the number of deaths and serious injuries on UK roads by calling for fast-tracked medical treatment for vocational drivers who have the condition obstructive sleep apnoea syndrome (OSAS).

The campaign has been launched by the OSA Partnership Group, a collective set up to raise awareness of the condition. The Group calls on the Department of Health to issue guidance to Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs), hospitals and GPs to expedite treatment of vocational drivers with

OSAS to enable driving again within a maximum of four weeks following first referral.

Obstructive sleep apnoea syndrome (OSAS) is particularly common amongst middle-aged men, especially those who are overweight. Studies have shown that when a driver with untreated OSAS gets behind the wheel of a vehicle, they are between 3 and 9 times more likely to have an accident and that this accident is likely to be of increased severity.

Professor John Stradling, a member of the OSA Partnership Group and author of the campaign paper, has spent his career working with sleep apnoea patients as a respiratory consultant in Oxford. He says, “In my experience vocational drivers are often the safest on our roads but those with OSAS have no control over their sleepiness. We also know that these drivers are reluctant to come forward with symptoms of OSAS for fear of losing their licence, and therefore their livelihood.

“Through the collaborative work our Group has undertaken with the transport industry, we believe that by expediting treatment, we can reduce this fear and therefore encourage drivers to get the treatment that will allow them to drive safely (and considerably benefit their quality of life). In doing so, we can eliminate many unnecessary road traffic accidents, and ultimately reduce the number of serious injuries and fatalities.”

The most usual treatment for OSAS is Continuous Positive Air Pressure (CPAP). Indeed in 2008 NICE carried out a technology appraisal that said that CPAP should be available to all who required it but it did not give a timescale for supply, and as a result this varies widely across the UK from a few weeks to several months. Yet it is the uncertainty as to how soon they will be treated that stops many drivers coming forward.

Bill Johnston, Chairman of Sleep Apnoea Trust (SATA), a member of the OSA Partnership Group says, “We believe that this campaign will provide drivers and their employers with a clear indication of how long a driver can expect to be off the road and therefore enable contingency plans to be put in place, The alternative, particularly in light of the growing prevalence of sleep apnoea, is to risk an increase in road traffic accidents and more deaths on our roads.”

RAC Business, which has recently joined the OSA Partnership Group, also

recognises the significance of the campaign.

Jenny Powley, RAC Business Corporate Sales Director, said: “This is an incredibly important initiative as OSAS is a condition which has no respect for the great skill and experience of the drivers it can affect. Although we know an average HGV driver completes many miles every year without incident, if they do have an accident it can often be much more damaging than a smaller vehicle such as a car, due its size and bulk.

“In the long term business as a whole will benefit as drivers who suspect they may be suffering from OSAS will be able to get the treatment they need and be back on the road much more quickly, which is a better outcome for the business owner, fleet manager and everyone concerned.”

Professor Stradling concludes, “We have spoken to a number of clinicians and sleep clinics, all of whom have agreed that vocational drivers can, and should, be treated within this time period. We would now ask the Department of Health to support our call and to put this into action in order to save the devastating cost of accidents caused by untreated OSA patients.”

Ends

The Four-Week Wait Campaign

A copy of the campaign paper can be located at <http://sleep-apnoea-trust.org/four-week-wait-campaign.htm>. The document will be available from 12.01am on 3rd March 2015. However if you need a copy in the meantime, please contact one of the team detailed above.

What is Obstructive Sleep Apnoea (OSA)?

OSA is a condition that affects breathing while you are sleeping, due to partial or total closure of the airway behind the tongue. This:

- Disrupts your normal breathing pattern
- Causes your body to briefly wake up to restore normal breathing
- May prevent you from enjoying a good night's rest
- Is nearly always accompanied by loud snoring

OSAS is a more severe form of OSA where there is evidence of both a

disruption of normal breathing patterns during sleep, and symptoms such as excessive sleepiness in the daytime. OSAS occurs in approximately a quarter of those with OSA.

If you suffer from OSAS, the pauses in breathing can happen hundreds of times a night, which most of the time you won't be aware of. This means you're getting less of the restorative kind of sleep required to enable you to work with the levels of energy and concentration needed to drive safely.

About the OSA Partnership Group

The OSA Partnership Group is made up of members with an interest in Obstructive Sleep Apnoea (OSA) representing clinicians, academics, fleet trade bodies, health and safety organisations and patient groups.

The Group's objectives are to raise awareness of OSA and the availability of treatment to manage the symptoms, as well as the implications if the condition goes untreated, particularly in commercial drivers.

In addition to this campaign, the group has recently worked with the Freight Transport Association to develop a driver training module, the Certificate of Professional Competence (CPC), to explain what OSAS is, its risks and treatment.

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