

IS THERE A DOCTOR ON BOARD? WHEN PASSENGERS TURN INTO PATIENTS

News / Airlines



There's nothing like a request for medical staff from the flight attendant to put your complaints about over-zealous seat recliners into perspective.

What's a diverted inbound flight compared with an averted cardiac arrest? Being young, I rarely think about the toll flying can place on the body – other than the heightened stress when I'm languishing by the boarding gate too long.

For many, it's a different story: where altitude pressure changes and long periods staying put can magnify present respiratory or cardiovascular conditions.

This happened to a poor chap next to me on a recent flight from Vancouver to Auckland. Within minutes of take-off he found it difficult to breathe and nearly passed out. The call went out for doctors on-board, the cabin manager deployed the oxygen tank and within the hour he was back to normal.

The situation was serious enough to stop me whining about the flight's niggles but was one a few I've been on where the cabin crew or flight deck had to do a shout out for any medical staff on-board.

The airlines say their cabin crew are fully trained for most medical emergencies, professional

doctors and nurses would merely be assisting – although I have witnessed some situations where they played a starring role.

The carriers also have communication links to trained medical staff on the ground which can be called upon to talk them through anything major if a doctor is not onboard. To control the risk that there may not be a passenger with a medical degree onboard and, of course, for the benefit of the sick passenger too, each of the airlines surveyed said they used pre-flight medical checks.

The only catch is that each passenger must sign up for these before getting clearance to fly, such as Air New Zealand's MEDA system, with the help of their GP. But how many older passengers can you think of who insist "I don't need all that fuss, I'm fine".

My Auckland-bound Canadian clearly fell into this category. Check-in staff and ground crew are also on the look-out for passengers pre-flight who look visibly ill – and not just the ones who have gone a bit too hard at the departure lounge bar.

Defibrillators, oxygen tanks CPR training and on-board medications for conditions like angina and allergic reactions are near-universal, but if things get serious in the air, it's the pilot not the doctor who gets to pull rank and decide if a diversion is necessary in a medical emergency.

They will consider the passenger-turned-patient's condition, alternative airports, medical advice onboard from volunteers and from services such as MediLink and MediAire, which guide cabin crew on complex procedures.

With the number of people flying increasing globally, combined with a wealthy but ageing population, it's easy to assume the number of these medical call-to-arms will increase rather than decrease (despite the design and technology improvements in newer aircraft).

Of course, being dutiful and willing to help by nature, the holidaying doctors and nurses have always offered assistance without hesitation or, in fact, compensation. But, when things get serious, should airlines offer something more to than a cheery "thanks" to the passengers-come-medics?

A gift of gratitude pales in comparison to costs related to a flight that may have otherwise been diverted causing commuter delays and holiday meltdowns aplenty and extra costs for the airline if diversions occur – or worse, if the cabin crew have to discretely deal with a passenger who dies en route (now that's a baggage fee we'd all like to avoid).

It may only be tokenism, but one retired GP from the UK was irked enough recently when he was reportedly thanked by a budget airline for caring for a very sick woman on a flight with a free coffee from the snack trolley but asked to cough up \$3 for a Kit Kat. He probably wanted to break more than chocolate fingers after the lack of awareness he (and other off-duty medical staff) shown by the cabin crew. It wasn't until he notified British media that he was gifted a flight voucher.

Airlines closer to home have a mixed policy when I asked if they were known to bump-up any medical practitioners if they help out in a make-do-triage in the sky.

Qantas informed me that any doctors or nurses that respond to the call of duty "insist it's their profession and a reward is not necessary". So back to cattle class please Doc if you're on the Flying Kangaroo.

Its subsidiary, Jetstar, said although it doesn't officially have a reward programme "we have on occasion showed our appreciation by gifting a Jetstar flight voucher". The carrier kept it vague, but

did say it "recognises" those who volunteer – which would come in handy when looking out for doctors or nurses on a flight.

Singapore Airlines said they always reward medical assistance with "a gift", but whether it's a Kit Kat or an upgrade is anyone's guess.

German giant Lufthansa passed with flying colours, giving doctors a €50 (\$82) flight voucher just for signing up to their loyalty programme – that way the airline is aware ahead of time how many doctors are seated on a flight, should a mile-high medical situation occur.

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